MAY 1994

ELLERY QUEEN®

THE WORLD'S LEADING

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

VEILS OF MYSTERY

10 TERRIFYING TALES

from

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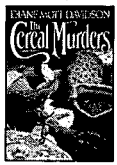

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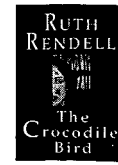

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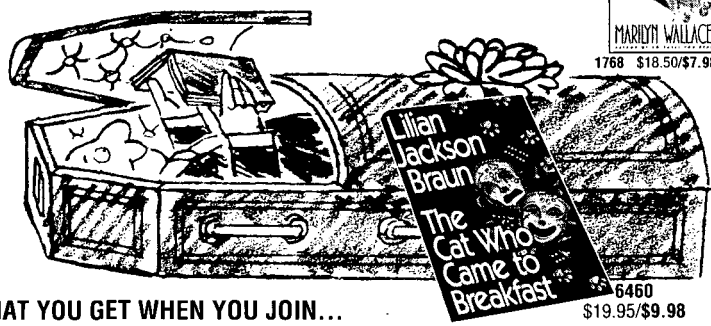

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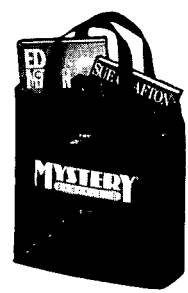

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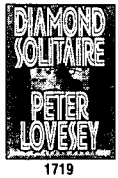

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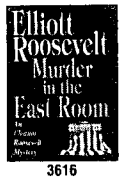

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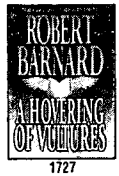

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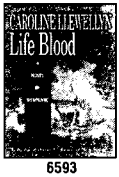

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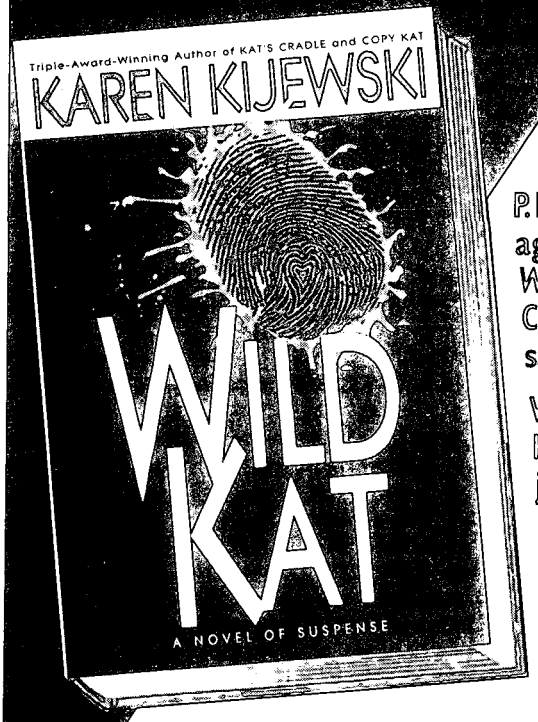

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THE VERY GENTLE MURDERS

by RAY BRADBURY

Joshua Enderby awoke in the middle of the night because he felt someone's fingers at his throat.

In the rich darkness above him he sensed but could not see his wife's frail skeletal weight seated on his chest while she dabbled and clenched tremblingly again and again at his neck.

He opened his eyes wide. He realized what she was trying to do. It was so ridiculous he almost cried out with laughter!

His rickety, jaundiced, eighty-five-year-old wife was trying to strangle him!

She panted forth a rum-and-bitters smell as she perched there, toppling like a drunken moth, tinkering away as if he were a toy. She sighed irritably and her skinny fingers began to sweat as she gasped, "Why *don't* you, oh why *don't* you?"

Why don't I *what?* he wondered idly, lying there. He swallowed, and this faint action of his Adam's apple dislodged her feeble clutch. Why don't I *die,* is *that* it? he cried silently. He lay another few

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moments wondering if she'd gain strength enough to do him in. She didn't.

Should he snap on the light to confront her? Wouldn't she look a silly ass, a skinny chicken aloft sidesaddle on her hated husband's amazed body, and him laughing?

Joshua Enderby groaned and yawned. "Missy?"

Her hands froze on his collarbone.

"Will you—" He turned, pretending half-sleep. "Will you —please—" he yawned, "move to *your* side—of the bed? Eh? Good girl."

Missy moved off in the dark. He heard ice tinkle. She was having another shot of rum.

At noon the next day, enjoying the weather and waiting for luncheon guests to arrive, old Joshua and Missy traded drinks in the garden pavilion. He handed her Dubonnet, she gave him sherry.

There was a moment of silence as both eyed the stuff and hesitated to sip. He handled his glass in such a way that his large white diamond ring sparkled and glittered on his palsied hand. Its light made him flinch and at last he gathered his phlegm.

"Missy," he said. "You haven't long to live, you know."

Missy was hidden behind jonquils in a crystal bowl and now peered out at her mummified husband. Both perceived that the other's hands shook. She wore a cobalt blue dress, heavily iced with luncheon jewels, little glittery planets under each ear, a scarlet design for a mouth. The ancient whore of Babylon, he thought drily.

"How odd, my dear, how very odd," Missy said with a polite scrape of her voice. "Why only last night—"

"You were *thinking* of me?"

"We must talk."

"Yes, we must." He leaned like a wax mannequin in his chair. "No rush. But if I do you in, or if you do me in (it matters not which), let's protect each other, yes? Oh, don't look at me in amaze, my dear. I was perfectly aware of your little gallup last night on my ribs, fumbling with my esophagus, feeling the tumblers click, or whatever."

"Dear me." Blood rose in Missy's powdery cheeks. "Were you awake all during? I'm mortified. I think I shall have to go lie down."

"Nonsense," Joshua stopped her. "If I die, you should be shielded so no one'll accuse you. Same with me, if *you* die. Why go to all the

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trouble of trying to—eliminate—each other if it just means a gallows drop or a french fry."

"Logical enough," she agreed.

"I suggest a—a series of mash notes to each other. Umm, lavish displays of sentiment before friends; gifts, *et cetera*. I'll run up bills for flowers, diamond bracelets. You purchase fine leather wallets and gold-ferruled canes for *me*."

"You have a head for things, I must say," she admitted.

"It will help allay suspicion if we appear madly, anciently in love."

"You know," she said, tiredly, "it doesn't matter, Joshua, which of us dies first, except that I'm *very* old and would like to do *one* thing right in my life. I've always been such a dilettante. I've never liked you. Loved you, yes, but that's ten million years back. You never were a friend. If it weren't for the children—"

"Motives are bilge," he said. "We are two querulous old pots with nothing to do but kick off, and make a circus of *that*. But how much better the dying game if we write a few rules, act it neatly, with no one the wiser. How long has this assassination plot of yours been active?"

She beamed. "Remember the opera last week? You slipped from the curb? That car almost nailed you?"

"Good lord," he laughed. "I thought someone shoved *both* of us!" He leaned forward, chuckling. "Okay. When you fell in the bath last month? *I* greased the tub!"

Unthinkingly, she gasped, drank part of her Dubonnet, then froze.

Reading her mind, he stared at his own drink.

"This isn't poisoned, by any chance?" He sniffed his glass.

"Don't be silly," she replied, touching her Dubonnet with a lizard's doubtful tongue, "they'd find the residue in what's left of your stomach. Just be sure you double-check your shower tonight. I have kited the temperature, which might bring on a seizure."

"You *didn't!*" he scoffed.

"I've *thought* about it," she confessed.

The front door chimes rang, but not with their usual joy, sounding more funereal. Nonsense! Joshua thought. Bosh! thought Missy, then brightened:

"We have forgotten our luncheon guests! That's the Gowrys! He's a bore, but be nice! Fix your collar."

"It's damned tight. Too much starch. One more plot to strangle me?"

"I wish I *had* thought of that. Double-time, now!"

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And they marched, arm in arm, with idiot laughter, off to meet the half-forgotten Gowrys.

Cocktails were served. The old relics sat side by side, hands laced like school chums, laughing with weak heartiness at Gowry's dire jokes. They leaned forward to show him their porcelain smiles, saying, "Oh, that's a *good* one!" loudly, and, softly, *sotto voce,* to each other: "Thought of anything new?" "Electric razor in your bath?" "Not bad, not bad!"

"And then *Pat* said to Mike!" cried Mr. Gowry.

From the corner of his mouth Joshua whispered to Missy, "You know, I dislike you with something approaching the colossal proportions of first love. You have taught me mayhem. How?"

"When the teacher is ready, the pupil will arrive," whispered Missy.

Laughter rose in tumbling, whirling waves. The room was giddy, airy, light. "So Pat says to Mike, do it *yourself!"* boomed Gowry. "Oh *ho!"* everyone exploded.

"Now, dear." Missy waved at her ancient husband. "Tell one of *your* jokes. Oh, but *first,"* she remembered cleverly, "trot downcellar, darling, and fetch the brandy."

Gowry sprang forward with wild courtesy. *"I* know where it is!"

"Oh, Mr. Gowry, *don't!"*

Missy gestured frantically.

Mr. Gowry ran from the room.

"Oh, dear, dear me," cried Missy.

A moment later, Gowry uttered a loud shriek from the basement, followed by a thunderous crash.

Missy hippety-hopped out, only to reappear moments later, her hand clutched to her throat. "Heavens to Betsy," she wailed. "Come look. I *do* believe Mr. Gowry has pitched himself straight down the cellar stairs!"

The next morning Joshua Enderby shuffled into the house lugging a large green-velvet board some five feet by three, on which pistols were clasped in display.

"Here I am!" he shouted.

Missy appeared with a rum collins in one bracelet-jangly hand, her cane thumping in the other. "What's *that?"* she demanded.

"First, how's old Gowry?"

"Broken leg. Wish it had been his vocal cords."

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"Shame about that top cellar step gone loose, eh?" The old man placed the green velvet board. "Good thing Gowry lurched for the brandy, not I."

"Shame." The wife drank thirstily. "Explain."

"I'm in the antique gun collecting business." He waved at the weapons in their neat leather nests.

"I don't see—"

"With a collection of guns to clean—*bang!*" He beamed. "Man shoots wife while oiling matchlock garter pistol. Didn't know it was loaded, says weeping spouse."

"Touché," she said.

An hour later, while oiling a revolver, he almost blew his brains out.

His wife came thumping in and froze. "Hell. You're still alive."

"Loaded, by God!" He lifted the weapon in a trembling hand. *"None were* loaded! Unless—"

"Unless—?"

He seized three more weapons. *"All* loaded! *You!"*

"Me," she said. "While you ate lunch. I suppose I'll have to give you tea, now. Come along."

He stared at the bullet hole in the wall. "Tea, hell," he said. "Where's the *gin?!"*

It was *her* turn for a shopping spree. "There are ants in the house." She rattled her full shopping bag and set out ant-paste pots in all the rooms, sprinkled ant powders on window sills, in his golf bag, and over his gun collection. From other sacks she drew rat poisons, mouse killers, and bug exterminators. "A bad summer for roaches." She distributed these liberally among the foods.

"That's a double-edged sword," he observed. "You'll fall on it!"

"Bilge. The victim mustn't *choose* his demise."

"Yes, but no violence. I wish a serene face for the coroner."

"Vanity. Dear Josh, your face will twist like a corkscrew with one heaping teaspoon of Black Leaf 40 in your midnight cocoa!"

"I," he shot back, "know a recipe will break you out in a thousand lumps before expiring!"

She quieted. "Why, Josh, I wouldn't *dream* of using Black Leaf 40."

He bowed. "I wouldn't dream of using the thousand-lump recipe."

"Shake," she said.

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Their assassins game continued. He bought huge rattraps to hide in the halls. "You run barefoot so: *small* wounds, *large* infections!"

She in turn stuck the sofas full of antimacassar pins. Wherever he laid a hand it drew blood. "Ow! Damn!" He sucked his fingers. "Are these Amazon Indian blow-gun darts?"

"No. Just plain old rusty lockjaw needles."

"Oh," he said.

Though he was ageing fast, Joshua Enderby dearly loved to drive. You could see him motoring with feeble wildness up and down the hills of Beverly, mouth gaped, eyes blinking palely.

One afternoon he phoned from Malibu. "Missy? My God, I almost drove from a cliff. My right front wheel flew off on a straightaway!"

"I planned it for a *curve!*"

"Sorry."

"Got the idea from Action News. Loosen car's wheel lugs: Tomato *surprise.*"

"Never mind about careless old me," he said. "What's new with you?"

"Rug slipped on the hall stairs. Maid fell on her prat."

"Poor Lila."

"I send her everywhere ahead now. She bucketed down like a laundry bag. Lucky she's all fat."

"We'll kill that one between us, if we're not careful."

"Do you *think?* Oh, I *do* like Lila *so.*"

"Lay Lila off for a spell. Hire someone new. If we catch *them* in our crossfire, won't be so sad. Hate to think of Lila smashed under a chandelier or—"

"Chandelier!" Missy shrieked. "You been fiddling with my grandma's Fountainebleau Palace crystal hangings? Listen here, mister, you're not to *touch* that chandelier!"

"Promise," he muttered.

"Good grief! Those lovely crystals! If they fell and missed me I'd hop on one leg to cane you to death, then wake you up and cane you *again!*"

Slam went the phone.

Joshua Enderby stepped in from the balcony at supper that night. He'd been smoking. He looked at the table. "Where's your strawberry crumpet?"

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"I wasn't hungry. I gave it to the new maid."

"Idiot!"

She glared. "Don't tell me you poisoned that crumpet, you old S.O.B.?"

There was a crash from the kitchen.

Joshua went to look and returned. "She's not new anymore," he said.

They stashed the new maid in an attic trunk. No one telephoned to ask for her.

"Disappointing," observed Missy on the seventh day. "I felt certain there'd be a tall, cold man with a notebook and another with a camera and flashbulbs flashing. Poor girl was lonelier than we *guessed.*"

Cocktail parties streamed wildly through the house. It was Missy's idea. "So we can pick each other off in a forest of obstacles; moving targets!"

Mr. Gowry, gamely returning to the house, limping after his tumble of some weeks before, joked, laughed, and didn't quite blow his ear off with one of the dueling pistols. Everyone roared, but the party broke up early. Gowry vowed never to return.

Then there was a Miss Kummer who, staying overnight, borrowed Joshua's electric razor and was almost but not quite electrocuted. She left the house rubbing her right underarm. Joshua promptly grew a beard.

Soon after, a Mr. Schlagel vanished. So did a Mr. Smith. The last seen of these unfortunates was at a Saturday night soiree at the Enderby's mansion.

"Hide and seek?" Friends slapped Joshua's back jovially.

"How *do* you do it? Kill 'em with toadstools, plant 'em like mushrooms?"

"Grand joke, yes!" chortled Joshua. "No, no, ha, not toadstools, but one got locked in our stand-up fridge. Overnight Eskimo Pie. The other tripped on a croquet hoop. Defenestrated through a greenhouse window."

"Eskimo Pie, defenestrated!" hooted the party people. "Dear Joshua, you *are* a card!"

"I speak only the *truth,*" Joshua protested.

"What won't you think of next?"

"One wonders what *did* happen to old Schlagel and that rascal Smith?"

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"What *did* happen to Schlagel and Smith?" Missy inquired some days later.

"Let me explain. The Eskimo Pie was my dessert. But the croquet hoop? No! Did *you* spot it in the wrong place, hoping I'd pop by and lunge through the greenhouse panes?"

Missy turned to stone; he had touched a nerve.

"Well, now, it's time for a wee talk," he said. "Cancel the parties. One more victim and sirens will announce the arrival of the law."

"Yes," Missy agreed. "Our target practice seems to wind up in ricochet. About that croquet hoop. You always take midnight greenhouse walks. Why was that damn fool Schlagel stumbling about out there at two A.M.? Dumb ox. Is he *still* under the compost?"

"Until I stash him with he-who-is-frozen."

"Dear, dear. No more parties."

"Just you, me, and—ah—the chandelier?"

"Ah, no. I've hid the stepladder so you can't climb!"

"Damn," said Joshua.

That night by the fireplace he poured a few glasses of their best port. While he was out of the room, answering the telephone, she dropped a little white powder in her *own* glass.

"Hate this," she murmured. "Terribly unoriginal. But there won't be an inquest. He looked long dead before he died, they'll say as they shut the lids." And she added a touch more lethal stuff to her port just as he wandered in to sit and pluck up his glass. He eyed it and fixed his wife a grin. "Ah, no, no you don't!"

"Don't what?" she said, all innocence.

The fire crackled warmly, gently on the hearth. The mantel clock ticked.

"You don't mind, *do* you, my dear, if we exchange drinks?"

"Surely you don't think I poisoned your drink while you were out?"

"Trite. Banal. But possible."

"Well then, fussbudget, *trade.*"

He looked surprised, but traded glasses.

"Here's *not* looking at you!" both said, and laughed.

They drank with mysterious smiles.

And then they sat with immense satisfaction in their easy chairs, the firelight glimmering on their ghost-pale faces, letting the port warm their almost spidery veins. He stuck his legs out and held one

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hand to the fire. "Ah," he sighed. "Nothing, nothing quite like port!"

She leaned her small grey head back, dozing, gumming her red-sticky mouth and glancing at him with half-secretive, lazy eyes. "Poor Lila," she murmured.

"Yes," he murmured. "Lila. Poor."

The fire popped and she at last added, "Poor Mr. Schlagel."

"Yes," he drowsed. "Poor Schlagel. Don't forget Smith."

"And you, old man," she said finally, slowly, slyly. "How do *you* feel?"

"Sleepy."

"*Very* sleepy?"

"Un-hunh." He studied her with bright eyes. "And, my dear, what about you?"

"Sleepy," she said behind closed eyes. Then they popped wide. "Why all these questions?"

"Indeed," he said, stirring alert. "Why?"

"Oh, well, because," she examined her little black shoe moving in a slow rhythm a long way off below her knee. "I think, or perhaps imagine, I have just destroyed your digestive and nervous systems."

For the moment he was drowsily content and examined the warm fire and listened to the clock tick. "What you mean is that you have just poisoned me?" He dreamed the words. "You *what!?"* He jumped as all the air gusted from his body. The port glass shattered on the floor.

She leaned forward like a fortuneteller eagerly predicting futures.

"I cleverly poisoned my own drink and knew that you'd ask to trade off, so you felt safe. And we *did!"* Her laugh tinkled.

He fell back in his chair, clutching at his face to stop the wild swiveling of his eyes. Then suddenly he remembered and let out an incredible explosion of laughter.

"Why?" cried Missy. "Why are you laughing?"

"Because," he gasped, tears streaming down his cheeks, his mouth grinning horribly, *"I* poisoned *my* drink! and hoped for an excuse to change with *you!"*

"Oh dear," she cried, no longer smiling. "How stupid of us. Why didn't I *guess?"*

"Because both of us are much *too* clever by far!" And he lay back chortling.

"Oh, the mortification, the embarrassment. I feel stark naked and hate myself!"

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"No, no," he husked. "Think, instead, how much you still hate me."

"With all my withered heart and soul. You?"

"No deathbed forgiveness here, old lily-white iron-maiden wife o' mine. Cheerio," he added, faintly, far away.

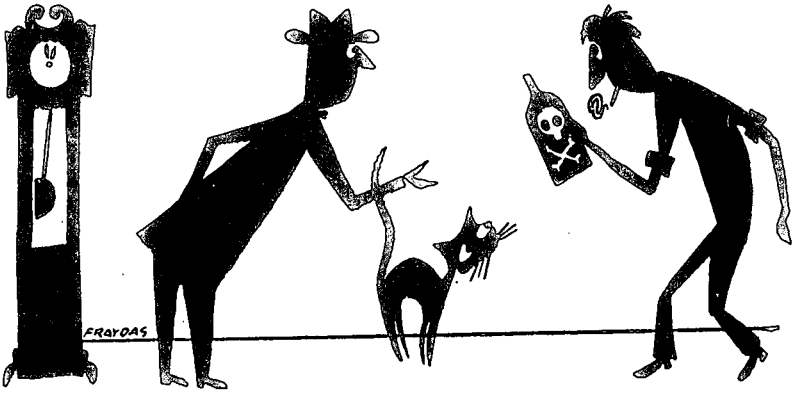
"If you think I'll say cheerio back, you're crazed," she whispered, her head rolling to one side, her eyes clamped, her mouth gone loose around the words. "But what the hell. Cheer—"

At which her breath ceased and the fire burned to ashes as the clock ticked and ticked in the quiet room.

Friends found them strewn in their library chairs the next day, both looking more than usually pleased with their situation.

"A suicide pact," said all. "So great their love they could not bear to let the other vanish alone into eternity."

"I hope," said Mr. Gowry, on his crutches, "my wife will someday join me in similar drinks."



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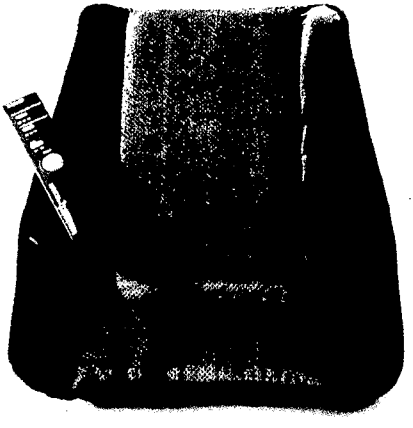

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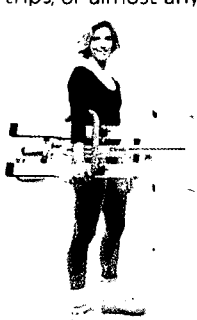

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JOHN LUTZ

Before becoming a full-time writer in 1975, John Lutz worked a variety of jobs from warehouseman to theater usher to switchboard operator for the St. Louis Metropolitan Police. Always a prolific short story writer, Mr. Lutz placed his first story with EQMM *in 1967 and has appeared regularly since in a variety of magazines and anthologies. Last year, his novel* SWF Seeks Same *was made into a movie starring Bridget Fonda and Jennifer Jason Leigh . . .*

THE CHESS PLAYERS

by JOHN LUTZ

The sky beyond the old man and the boy playing chess was dark and occasionally fractured by lightning. Against that backdrop, neither of them noticed the dust of the car approaching on the dirt road from the county highway.

Both the old man—who was younger than he at first appeared, with his white hair and beard—and the boy looked up when they heard the crunch of the tires and the soft thunking of rocks bouncing off the insides of the car's fenders. They remained seated beneath the branches of an elm, in the wooden kitchen chairs they'd dragged from the tiny farmhouse to place on either side of the small cedar table. On the table was a cheap chessboard and plastic pieces that were so light that from time to time the wind building up from the southwest tipped over the taller king, queen, or bishop. If the wind got much stronger, the pieces might blow from the board, but the old man and boy knew they wouldn't go far once they worked down in the coarse grass.

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The boy, who was eight years old and named Andrew, looked at the old man, who was his grandfather. He was a thin, dark-haired boy with a narrow, symmetrical face and bright but sad blue eyes. The old man swiveled slightly in his chair to watch the car, and the boy's calm, intelligent gaze followed.

The grandfather, who was sixty-seven and whose name was Willis Sharp, watched the car brake to a halt next to the cottonwood tree near the barn. Beyond it, all around the farmhouse and barn, the cornfields spread for acres and acres so that only the water tower at Centerville, fifteen miles away, was visible from the house. Wavering in the heat, it looked like a drab gray lightbulb supported by a spindly framework. Andrew, who had quite an imagination, had once told Willis he'd dreamed the water tower was an alien spaceship that had landed so its occupants could learn chess.

The car was a dusty black Chrysler New Yorker with a rental decal on its front bumper. Both its front doors opened simultaneously, and the two men inside climbed out. One was short and broad, the other tall and broad. The shorter one had on faded Levi's and an armless red T-shirt. When the two men got closer, Willis saw that the T-shirt had one of those yellow smiley faces on it, only this one had a bullethole seeping blood in its forehead. The blood was the same red as the rest of the shirt.

"Whaddya know?" the short one said by way of greeting, when the two men were about ten feet from the old man and boy.

"Not much," Willis said.

"I don't doubt it," the tall one said in a voice that cut. He had pale eyes like diamond chips, thin, cruel features, and was beginning to go bald on top. The breeze whipped the long, sandy hair above his right ear out away from his head as he lifted a hand and smoothed it back with a look of irritation. "Kinda isolated out here in Dullsville, aren't you, old-timer?"

Willis thought he recognized his accent. "We like isolation."

"You didn't ask us what *we* know," the short one said with the same accent as his companion. He had greasy black hair slicked straight back, a coiled snake tattooed on one bulging bicep, and two glittering rings on each hand.

"You two don't need to be asked, being from New York."

The two glanced at each other, thrown off a bit by that.

The tall one grinned meanly, not sweating at all in the heat even in his dark suit, and said, "Wise guys, putting down the big city. Smart guys. Chess players." He aimed his predatory smile at An-

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drew, who was staring up at him without fear but with a trace of uneasiness. "You're Andrew," the tall man said, "and you, old man, you're his grandfather, Willis."

"Who are you?" Andrew asked.

Without hesitation the tall man said, "I'm Freddy Clark. My friend here's called Zinc."

Willis didn't like it that they'd given their names so readily.

"They used to call me Snake," Zinc said, "then some yardbird that couldn't talk right made it sound like Zinc and I was stuck with it. Prison's like that."

In the corner of his vision Willis saw Andrew stiffen.

"What we know that you didn't ask us about," Freddy said, "is that Andrew here is staying a month at the farm till school starts, like he's done the last two summers. You grow a little corn here, but you lease out most of this land to a big co-op. And except for Andrew's visits, you live all alone in that dump of a house since your wife died six years ago." Freddy and Zinc traded grins, proud of the fruits of their research. "Oh, and you weren't home five years ago on July fifteenth."

"That last I wouldn't know about," Willis said, wondering who these two were, but knowing they were the worst kind of trouble. When the trouble came, maybe there'd be some way to get Andrew clear of it.

"The important thing is, *we* know," Zinc said. He popped a stick of gum in his mouth, tossing the wrapper to the breeze, and began chewing rapidly and grinning, now and then displaying the wad of gum on his tongue. He glanced around at the weathered old frame house, the leaning barn with only traces of red paint on it, the old green John Deere tractor sitting near the perfectly aligned rows of head-high cornstalks. "You about to plow or harvest with that thing?" Zinc asked, pointing at the tractor.

Freddy laughed at his friend's ignorance and winked. "You gotta forgive us, old man. We're city boys and don't know country ways."

"Yup, I could tell that right off."

Freddy cocked his head to the side and seemed to consider whether he'd been insulted. Apparently he decided not to take offense. "We came here to get something," he said.

"What I wish you'd get," Willis said, "is to the point." Not really so sure he wanted to hear the point, only that he wanted to know where he stood so he could formulate some kind of plan, even if it was a desperate one.

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"Teaching the boy how to play chess?" Zinc asked.

"He doesn't need much teaching," Willis said. "He's always been the sort that thinks ahead."

"Runs in the family, I'll bet," Freddy said with a sneer.

"Sorta."

"Nothin' runs in my family but noses," Zinc said.

"Wanna play a game?" Andrew asked hopefully, as if perhaps a friendly game of chess would somehow set things straight with these intruders.

"No," Freddy said, "but chess is a good game. It teaches you to think, like your grandpa said. Making plans, that's what life's all about. Thinking ahead is what separates winners from losers."

"Right now," Willis said, "let's think back to when I wasn't home five years ago on July fifteenth."

"Okay," Freddy said. "That's when the money from the Hopkinstown Bank robbery was buried in your cornfield."

"You guys the bank robbers?" Andrew blurted out in awe.

"Not us," Zinc said. "That ain't our game."

"But we did get acquainted with certain people in a certain institution whose game it was," Freddy said. "And under a kind of pressure, they told us where they hid the Hopkinstown Bank money when they were on the run after the robbery. They're still in the institution, and will be for the next fifteen years, but here we are."

"We came for the money," Zinc said. "We been thinking and dreaming about it for a long time. We ain't gonna leave without it."

"Just in case somebody should happen to come by this godforsaken dump," Freddy said, "we're your nephews from the city, come for a visit. Got that, Uncle?"

"Sure."

"What about you, kid?"

"I've got it, sir—cousin."

Zinc stared at him curiously, flexing a bicep and scratching it simultaneously. "He got that right?" he asked Freddy.

"Once removed or something," Freddy said. "Directions to the money say it's buried fifty feet due north of a big tree, some hundred paces from the northeast corner of the house." He glared at Willis. "The thing is, I don't see any tree there. Nothing but corn."

"Lightning struck the tree four years ago and killed it, and I cut down what was left."

"A tree big as we were told, there must be a stump or something in there among that corn," Freddy said.

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"No, I pulled the stump out with the tractor. That ground's been turned four times since then. I'd never be able to find exactly where that tree was now, even if I went looking for it."

"If we were in the big city," Zinc said, "I'd start doing things to the boy, and you'd find where that tree was in a hurry."

"In a New York minute," Freddy said. "But we're here in the heart of America where hard work's what people worship, so what's gonna happen is this, old man: You, Bobby Fischer there, and me and Zinc are gonna do some digging in the cornfield. We're gonna dig until we find the money."

"Hey! Looka the size of that fly!" Zinc yelled, and swatted at a huge black fly that had set down on his forearm. He watched the fly drone away, then stared at Willis in astonishment. "There one of them nuclear plants around here?"

"It's only a horsefly," Andrew said.

Zinc looked around. "I don't see no horses."

"They hang around cows and such," Freddy said. "I learned about them on a *National Geographic* special on TV."

"No cows around here, either," Zinc said.

"The wind carried it here from the next farm," Willis said, "where there's livestock."

"Long way," Freddy said.

"It mighta flapped its wings some," Zinc offered. "Or soared like an eagle."

"Well, us being city boys," Freddy said, "we've got no calluses, so you two'll do most of the digging. There shovels in that barn?"

"Sure," Willis said. "A pick, too." He didn't see how it would hurt to feign cooperation. Maybe the city cousins would let down their guard and make a mistake.

Freddy drew an automatic pistol from beneath his suitcoat. He left the coat unbuttoned and it flapped in the breeze, flashing a blue silk lining.

"Let's go dig," Willis said to Andrew, who was staring wide-eyed at the gun.

"What's gonna happen after we find the money?" Andrew asked.

Freddy motioned at the chessboard with the gun barrel. "Me and Zinc'll finish the game."

"Kid's a thinker, ain't he?" Zinc said, amused.

"Thinks *too* hard, though," Freddy said. "He's liable to have chronic headaches when he grows up." He winked at Zinc.

Andrew sidled over to Willis and gripped his hand. Willis felt

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something in his throat swell as they trudged toward the barn, with Freddy walking slightly ahead and to the side, half turned to face them so he could keep the gun leveled at Andrew. Zinc was walking behind them. Willis figured he had a gun, too. The only weapon Willis had was a twelve-gauge Ithaca shotgun locked away inside the house.

Willis squinted into the wind as he noticed several barn swallows wheeling above the open loft door. They tried to enter the barn but the wind had picked up to the point where they couldn't control themselves on the currents of air and they were whisked from sight.

"I got something in my eye!" Zinc shouted. "I hate this damned part of the country!"

The dark clouds had moved in over the farm now and seemed very low. Suddenly torrents of rain began to fall.

"What next?" Zinc yelled.

"Shut up!" Freddy shouted, using his free hand to turn up his collar.

"I'm getting friggin' soaked, Freddy!"

"Good! The rain'll make the ground softer so we can dig easier."

Then, just as suddenly, the rain stopped.

Hail began falling, not evenly like the rain, but erratically, so that it lay in heaps on the ground in golf-ball-size nuggets of ice.

Freddy had lowered his head, shielding his balding pate with his hand, all the while staring coldly at Willis over the barrel of the gun.

The hail stopped, and so did the wind.

"I never seen anything like that," Zinc said uneasily.

A pale, greenish light lay over everything, as if the dimmed sunlight was reflecting the green of the cornfields. The motionless air seemed thick enough to feel, like silk against flesh. There was no movement, no sound.

"Grampa!" Andrew cried, and pointed.

Willis saw a black funnel of swirling wind dip from the low clouds and sweep across the far edge of the cornfield. Dirt and cornstalks flew wildly as it touched down, skipped in a cloud of dust to the other side of the road, then back again. It was moving in their direction.

"What the hell's that?" Zinc screamed.

"Cyclone!" Freddy shouted.

"Tornado!" Willis corrected.

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Zinc had shuffled around to face them, a silver revolver dangling at his side in his right hand. His thick features were knotted in confusion. "Whadda we do?"

"Let's get in the barn!" Freddy yelled. Fear raised his voice an octave and glittered in his eyes.

"That'd be suicide," Willis said.

The wind was with them again, pressing hard against them so they had to lean into it. As they watched, the tractor began to roll, then gained speed as if someone were driving it, and disappeared into the high corn. The big Chrysler the two men arrived in was broadside to the wind and began to rock violently on its soft suspension.

"There's a storm shelter there by the house," Willis said, holding Andrew tight to him, "but it's only big enough for two!"

Andrew looked up at him, realizing what was going to happen. He began to scream.

Zinc bolted and ran for the raised, square wooden door set in concrete six inches above the ground. He flipped open the door and leaped inside, the door slamming behind him in the wind.

Andrew's screams were like the wail of an emergency siren.

"Stay where you are!" Freddy yelled, waving the gun at them.

"You can't leave us out here!" Willis pleaded.

"Just like a good ol' boy to give shelter to his city cousins!" Freddy said, grinning like death in his terror as he held the gun on them and backed to the wooden door.

"For God's sake, man! We'll be blown into the next state!"

"He better not have locked this thing!" Freddy said with sudden panic, as he tugged the door up and open and flung himself inside out of the wind.

Immediately Willis scooped up Andrew, who'd become silent, and sprinted for the house.

Inside, he opened a window to equalize pressure in case the tornado hit, then ran to the door to the fruit cellar, opened it, and scrambled down into the small, musty space, shoving Andrew ahead of him.

The tornado ripped and roared above them, threatening to reach down with a finger of whirling destruction and pry them from their meager shelter.

They stayed there, huddled together, until the angry howl of the tornado had given way to silence.

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When they emerged from the cellar and ventured back outside, Willis saw that the tornado had cut a wide swath across the south end of the cornfield, following almost exactly the same course as the one that had struck a few years ago. Usually when tornados blew through, they stayed on the other side of the highway; something about rising air from the river a mile to the west. Quite a few shingles had been blown off the house roof, and one of the barn doors was open and hanging crookedly on its remaining hinge. If the tractor was okay, that was the extent of the damage.

"What are we gonna do now, Grampa?" Andrew asked. He no longer seemed frightened.

"Phone lines'll be down because of the tornado," Willis said, "so we can't call. Guess the thing to do is get the truck outa the barn and drive into town and fetch the sheriff, if he's not too busy. Then we'll drive back here, get what's left of them two fellas outa the well, and try to find enough of the chess set so we can finish our game."

Andrew said, "I think I remember where all the pieces were."

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a *NEW* short story by

BARBARA OWENS

Readers last saw Barbara Owens's detective team Skovich and Hacker in the March, 1992 EQMM, *in a puzzle surrounding a liquor-store hold-up ("Dead Ringers"). This time the duo are called out to the monied suburbs when a dead vagrant turns out to have a privileged pedigree . . .*

TIES THAT BIND

by BARBARA OWENS

Detective Hank Skovich shuffled into the squad room and moved carefully to his desk, easing himself into his squeaky, sway-backed chair. At the facing desk his partner, Terry Hacker, ducked his head to hide a grin.

From several desks away, Marty Kroft observed, "Hank, you been gimping around a couple days now. What's the trouble?"

When Skovich ignored him, Kroft persisted, "Old age getting you or what?"

As Skovich's expression turned sour, Hacker put in quickly, "Easy, Kroft." But he couldn't help himself. His grin broke wide open. "Be kind. Hank's got a boil on his butt."

Someone snickered, someone coughed, then the room exploded. Detectives pounded on their desks, choking. Even Skovich had to appreciate the situation and unloose an embarrassed grin.

"Thanks for the loyalty, partner," he told Hacker in a genial tone, but Hacker was laughing too hard to respond.

"You seen anyone about it?" Kroft asked when he was able to get the words out.

"No, I haven't. And I'd appreciate not talking about it, okay? It's my butt. I'll take care of it."

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"Listen," Kroft said, raising his voice for the room's benefit, "I got my Swiss army knife right here. Bend over your desk and I'll have that sucker lanced before you know what hit you. Glad to do it, too. No charge."

More hilarity. Skovich leaned towards Hacker. "I hope we got something that'll get us out of here. Right now."

Instantly, Hacker sobered. Time to go to work. "As a matter of fact, we do. A trip to the morgue. Looks like somebody's recognized that floater pulled out of the bay last week."

"Then let's go."

As they started across the room, accompanied by snickers and comments, Hacker couldn't resist.

"I'm gonna drive," he informed the men in passing. "Old pard's riding a little too high in the saddle today."

Skovich sighed as the noise level rose again. "You know I'm gonna have to get you for this."

"Yeah. But that's okay. It's worth it."

The middle-aged man had been brought out of the water by the docks. No identification, no marks other than the shattering of his skull. Beaten to death with a heavy object, and judging from the condition of his clothing and malnourished body, probably homeless. Just another transient, had been the department's guess. So it was a surprise when the detectives arrived at the morgue and learned who he was. Gordon Patterson, once a partner in the city's most prestigious brokerage firm.

"Everybody knows of Lane Patterson," Hacker said. "But I never heard of Gordon."

"Brothers," the coroner said. "Big scandal about twenty years ago—before your time. Skovich knows. But dental records check out and Lane gave us a visual. It's Gordon."

Skovich's eyebrows rose. "Lane Patterson came to the morgue?"

The coroner allowed himself a wry smile. "Not graciously. But there wasn't anyone else to go to."

"So what tipped you to Gordon in the first place?"

"Some street guy reported a missing friend. Obviously Gordon had fallen on hard times, but he was still using his own name. And he'd talked about a rich brother." He handed over a thin file. "Here's all the information I've got."

"Lane still here? We'll need to talk to him."

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Again the coroner smiled. "You think he'd hang around? No, I was told to inform the police to call for an appointment if it was necessary. He didn't seem to think it would be."

"Gee, that's too bad," Skovich said. "I'm afraid we'll have to disappoint him."

"They were a couple of middle-class boys who worked hard and hit it big," Skovich said, tilting cautiously to one hip as the car made a wide turn. "Lane was older, but Gordon had the personality. Everyone liked him. Lane married and had two kids. Gordon was still single when rumors started about him and Lane's wife, Rosalind. Next thing you know, Gordon's out of the firm. Lane divorced Rosalind, then she and Gordon disappeared. There was talk of a big payoff of some kind. To save face, I guess."

"I've heard that Lane Patterson's ruthless," Hacker said. "And the king of clout. Has a string tied to the big toe of every mover and shaker in town, and just a little tug on that string sets 'em all hopping."

"Yeah, he's tough, but there's never been a whiff of anything shady."

"He remarry?"

"No. Nannies and servants raised the kids, I guess. Lane spoiled them both. The boy, Philip, is a partner in the firm now."

"I've seen the daughter's picture in the society pages," Hacker said.

Startled, Skovich stared at him. "You read the society pages?"

"Don't read, boss. Just look at the pictures."

They had entered an area of sprawling homes half hidden behind hedges and walls. The streets were quiet. No one was in sight. Skovich scanned the discreet house numbers as they passed.

"You got any idea of what to expect here?" Hacker wanted to know. "How did he sound on the phone?"

"Polite. Not overjoyed."

"Damn." Hacker shook his head. "I was hoping he'd offer us tea or something. Maybe those cute little sandwiches."

Skovich grunted. "Okay, pay attention. Just because you're pretty doesn't mean anything here. This is as uptown as it gets. Don't scratch yourself or pick your nose, all right? Make me proud. There, that's it."

The massive house rose from the rear of a velvet lawn sweeping away from open iron gates. Hacker leaned over the steering wheel

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and stared. "My God, you'd need a map to find your way around in that place."

An expressionless servant ushered them into an immense book-lined study where Lane and Philip Patterson were waiting. Father and son wore then-and-now versions of the same body. They were short—both detectives loomed over them. Square compact frames, dark wiry hair, and hawkish, probing eyes. Neither Patterson revealed a smile. Through the French doors the detectives could see a young woman sitting beside an Olympic-sized pool.

"You have taken us away from our business," Lane Patterson began abruptly. "I trust this won't take long."

"No, sir," Skovich answered calmly. "But considering the circumstances, meeting at your home seemed less public."

Lane was seated in a soft armchair, his son standing at attention by his shoulder. The only accommodation left for the detectives was an unpadded wooden deacon's bench. Hacker sank onto it, his face breaking easily into its professional disarming smile. Regarding the comfortable armchair with an envious eye, Skovich perched precariously on the hard wood beside his partner. Once the pain flared and died, he took a deep breath and slid back.

"I have identified my brother's body in your morgue," Lane continued brusquely. "But since I've neither seen nor heard from him in more than twenty years, I don't know how I can help you find out what happened to him."

"What happened to him is that he was murdered," Skovich answered. "And you can help, if only to provide background. Do you know where he's been living or who we could contact for more recent information?"

The older man's jaw tightened. "And what makes you so sure he was murdered? They tell me he'd been in the water for several days. Any number of things could have caused his head wounds."

"The pathologist is sure, sir," Hacker said smoothly, turning up the wattage on his friendly smile. "The skull fractures indicate definite blunt trauma inflicted before death. We know this is painful for you, and we'll try to be as brief as possible, but a man has been killed. It's our job to find out the why and who."

Both Pattersons turned their hard eyes on him. Philip cleared his throat.

"We want to be cooperative, Detective, but you must understand that we've had no knowledge of my uncle's whereabouts for years. There's nothing we can tell you."

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"And pardon my bluntness," his father said, leaning towards Hacker, "but it is not painful. It's wrong for any man to die before his time, but I have no feelings for Gordon Patterson. He is no longer my brother and I have no information about his life since his departure from the firm." He stood, dismissing them. "Now you must excuse me. You are keeping me from my work." Without a backward look, he strode from the room.

Skovich and Hacker merely waited, side by side. Finally, Philip Patterson said quietly, "If you're aware of my family's history you must understand my father's feelings." His eyes looked bleak. "And I'm certain you are aware."

"Of the rupture between your father and brother, yes," Skovich said. "And we know the cause. But we are trying to solve a murder and we need information about your uncle. If you can't help us, we'll have to go elsewhere, so it would benefit you to help us. I'm sure you would like this matter taken care of as quietly as possible."

Philip's face softened. "We certainly would. I'm sure publicity is what my father fears most. He's been through that once, and has worked hard to rebuild our image in the community. If there's a way to avoid another dirty bath in public, we will be grateful."

"Then help us. Tell us what led to the break between them."

Philip sighed. "I was ten when my parents divorced, my sister Lindy only four. When the affair between Gordon and my mother became public, both freely admitted it. My father was devastated, of course. He bought Gordon out—"

"Bought out or forced out?" Skovich interrupted.

Philip's mouth thinned. "You won't find what you're looking for, Detective. The financial settlement was more than generous. In return, they agreed to leave the city and never come back. Nor would they try to contact any family member again. And they've done that. I can tell you this—Gordon had not been back long. You know the extent of my father's influence. If he'd been here for any length of time, trust me—we would have known."

A shadow passed across his face. "Neither his nor my mother's name is mentioned in this house and hasn't been since they left." He glanced at his thick gold watch. "And that's really all I can tell you. Will you excuse me now?"

The detectives rose, Skovich wincing as his seat slid across the hard wood. "Do you think your mother could help us?"

"I have no idea," Philip said stiffly. "I don't know where she is."

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"Well, that wasn't much," Hacker said as they climbed back into the car. "Better talk to the guy who reported Gordon missing, right?"

"Yeah. Nice to know someone cares about him."

"You really believe they haven't seen or heard from him or the mother in all this time?"

"I'm not sure," Skovich said slowly. "You?"

"Same. Hard to believe."

"Well, we'd better start looking for Rosalind."

"Right."

The car slid back into dignified streets. Skovich shifted uncomfortably. "You hungry?"

"I could eat."

"Let's do it. I need to get out and stand up for a while."

This time Hacker didn't smile. He shook his head. "If you won't go have that thing taken care of, at least try parking it in a warm bath." At Skovich's scowl he insisted, "It works. My grandmother told me."

"You ever have a boil there?"

"No."

"Your grandmother?"

"I never asked."

"Well, then don't be so quick to hand out dumb advice. I'm doing just fine." Skovich shifted again. "Just fine."

Back at the station, Hacker started on the trail of Rosalind Patterson while Skovich called the phone number left by Gordon's street friend. The number checked out to be a diner in an area not on the city's must-see tourist list. The man who answered said yeah, come on out, he'd show them where Rusty lived. Over cups of sour coffee, the detectives compared notes.

"All of Rosalind's family is gone," Hacker said. "I got a short list of old friends she might have kept in touch with, but hell, she could be anywhere. Could be dead."

"We don't know that she could tell us anything anyway. Maybe she and Gordon didn't stay together. It'll probably turn out that he got popped by some punk just having fun." Skovich was rummaging through his desk drawers. He produced a bottle of antacid pills, removed two, and chewed them with contentment.

"Oh God," Hacker said, "your gut talking to you again?"

"It says we're getting close. Just need the right lead. Let's go talk to Rusty."

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The man at the diner directed them to a tent city under a nearby overpass, and the appearance of two shields in their midst brought most residents to their feet, apprehensive.

"Hey, no hassle," the partners kept repeating. "Just looking for Rusty. He wants to see us. No problems here. Relax."

Rusty lived in a packing box. He was tall and thin, with dull eyes and a baggy, stained sweater. "So Gordon really did have a rich brother," he said, after Skovich explained who they were and that his friend was dead. "I *thought* he sounded on the level."

"What else did he tell you about his family?"

"Not much. I only knew him for a few days. Met him hanging around the diner, looking like he hadn't had a meal in days. I brought him here, kind of looked out for him. All he ever told me was that he was lying low, that there was someone he had to see. He mentioned straightening something out. He was a sad man, Gordon. Don't think I ever saw him smile."

"Did he locate who he was looking for?"

"Didn't say. I saw him talking on the pay phone by the diner a time or two. You seen his brother? Maybe he can help."

"His brother says he hasn't seen or heard from him in years."

Rusty nodded thoughtfully. "Well, he might've connected, because he told me the day before he disappeared that things were okay and he might be heading out again soon."

"He say where?" Hacker asked.

Rusty's smile forgave him. "We don't get nosy here, Detective. We all got stories. If we want to tell them, we do. If not, nobody asks."

Skovich glanced at all the eyes watching them from the shadows. "He have any enemies down here? Anyone who might want to kill him?"

"I have to doubt that. Gordon kept to himself. He wasn't into booze or drugs, and he didn't have anything to steal."

The air under the overpass was raw and carried a thick pervasive smell. Skovich took his hand out of his pocket and shook Rusty's hand.

"Thanks," he said. "We appreciate your help."

Rusty squinted at the bill Skovich had tucked into his hand. His head began to shake. "Hey, I don't want this. I didn't do it for money. Gordon was my—"

"Take it," Skovich insisted. "If you hadn't reported him missing, we might never have known who he was."

"Well . . ."

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"You did us a favor," Hacker added, turning on his smile. "Maybe you can help us out again sometime."

The bill disappeared into a shirt pocket. "I will if I can," Rusty said, and the detectives hurried gratefully back into fresh open air.

"Gordon was a long way from the boardroom, wasn't he?" Hacker's voice was subdued.

Skovich didn't answer. He was chewing hard on antacids.

A whoopee cushion had been placed in Skovich's desk chair. After a thoughtful look at it, he filched a rose from a female detective's desk, taped it to the cushion, and slipped it into Marty Kroft's vacant chair. Then he and Hacker sat down to go over their notes.

"It's gotta go back to the family," Hacker said finally. "Don't see the motive, though."

Skovich nodded. "I get the same feeling. And it's not just because he defied the agreement and came back. Something more. Extortion, maybe? Gordon wanted more money?"

"Well, I guess we have to find out who he came to see."

"Who else?" Skovich said. "His brother. Lane looks clean, but maybe Gordon knew where some old bodies were buried. Blackmail."

"Could be," Hacker agreed.

"Keep digging on Rosalind. And we'll get the phone records from that pay phone Gordon used. I've got an itch to talk to Lane again."

Hacker leaned back, locking his hands behind his head. "Hank, why don't you go home? You're jiggling around like your pants are on fire. I'll take care of things."

As Skovich opened his mouth to protest, Hacker cut him off. "I mean it. You won't be any good to me or the case if you get completely down."

"Damn it, it's only a boil," Skovich argued feebly, but his partner merely stared at him until he finally got to his feet. Just as he reached the squad room door, he heard the whoopee cushion get rude behind him. Marty Kroft swore. Skovich smiled.

On the following morning they received a terse summons from Philip Patterson, and were soon being ushered back into the elegant study. Philip was waiting with a grim smile. His father was not in evidence.

"My father offers his apologies for his absence. He asked me to inform you that I'm authorized to speak on his behalf. Please, sit down."

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Skovich made a beeline for the soft armchair before someone else snagged it. Still standing, Hacker squared his shoulders and faced Philip Patterson's formidable gaze.

"Mr. Patterson, a member of your immediate family has been murdered. Your father and uncle have a somewhat volatile history. Now, we'll get the answers we want if we have to have all of you brought into the station for questioning. Both you and your father need to understand that."

Philip's face reddened. "I hope that won't be necessary. It was my father's intention, by asking you here, to show you that we will cooperate in any way we can."

Satisfied, Hacker settled onto the wooden bench, notebook in hand, just as the study door opened and the young woman from the pool entered the room. Philip's face softened at the sight of her.

"I'm busy just now, Lindy. I'll only be a few minutes."

Lindy Patterson was not made from the same pattern as her father and brother. Small-boned and graceful, her long dark hair and creamy skin gave her an ethereal air. She flashed a friendly smile at the detectives and said in a girlish voice, "I know what the meeting concerns. But I'm a member of this family, too, and I'm not a child. I'd like to be included, if you don't mind."

Moving to her, Philip put an arm around her shoulders. "I do mind," he said gently. "There's no need for you to be involved. It's unpleasant, Lindy. It'll only upset you."

The young woman's smile sought out Terry Hacker, sharing her predicament with him. "My father and brother are very protective," she murmured. "But I don't upset easily and I *am* involved, wouldn't you say?"

Hacker didn't answer—he was busy smiling back and sucking in his gut. Skovich said, "I don't think you can give us much background, Miss Patterson. You were pretty small when your uncle left."

Her clear blue eyes turned to him. "Exactly. So since I don't remember either Mother or Gordon, I can't see how this discussion would upset me."

"Lindy," Philip said, but she was already seated, hands folded in her lap.

"I won't say anything unless you want me to." She smiled, and Skovich watched Philip concede. He doubted that Philip ever won with Lindy.

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Philip Patterson picked up a folder from his father's desk. "I asked you to come because my father has volunteered to furnish you with the legal agreements reached when my mother and uncle left." He handed the papers to Skovich. "If you have any suspicions about the arrangements, this should calm them. The terms are straightforward and more than generous, as you will see. And that, as far as my father was concerned, was the end of it. You must believe there's nothing more we can tell you."

As Skovich scanned the brief documents, Hacker said, "Maybe not. We've just received information that Gordon was trying to contact someone, that he wanted to straighten something out. Are you certain you haven't heard from him?"

Philip stiffened. "Absolutely not."

"Both you and your father would swear to that?"

"We would."

"Nor your mother?"

Philip's mouth thinned. "Not since the day she left."

The desk phone rang. Skovich hitched himself up from the chair. "Then we won't take any more of your time just now. Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Patterson. We'll be in touch."

Lindy rose gracefully. "Take your call, Philip. I'll see the officers out."

They paused on the wide veranda. Perfect flowers bloomed everywhere on the long sweep of lawn. Lindy shared her smile between them. "I hope this will be over soon. I know you have a job to do, but this is very difficult for Philip and my father."

"I know. But it can't be helped," Skovich said.

"Of course. You see, it's different for me. The only memories I have are of Daddy and Philip." Her eyes twinkled. "I'm afraid I'm badly spoiled—they've never denied me anything. I suppose that's because I was so young at the time."

"Well, you're lucky in a way," Skovich said. "You've certainly grown up with every privilege."

She smiled. "Yes, and I won't deny that I have enjoyed it," she said frankly. "Money can be a lot of fun."

With a final dazzling smile, she left them, and the detectives sat in the car for a few minutes while Skovich scanned the financial agreement Philip Patterson had given them.

"You know, I wouldn't mind a payoff like this to brush a little romp under the rug. Rosalind and Gordon never had to work another day if they didn't want to."

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"I wonder what it would be like to get involved with a girl like Lindy," Hacker said.

Skovich grunted. "Out of your league, my friend. Here's a girl who doesn't even lay out her own jammies at night. I don't see her getting interested in the likes of you."

"Don't be so sure. I'm kind of dashing in my own way. That might be enough."

Skovich's gut took a slow roll. "You mind if we get back to the case? I don't feel right about this, Terry. Something's missing."

None of Rosalind Patterson's old friends and acquaintances admitted any knowledge of her whereabouts. Apparently she had cut all ties when she left.

"I'm not sure I believe that," Skovich groused. "Surely there's at least one tie there."

But he cheered up when phone records revealed three calls went out from the pay phone outside the diner to Lane Patterson's home.

"Somebody's lying," Hacker sang gleefully. "Gordon *did* contact the family."

"Unless some servant cut him off at the pass," Skovich said. "But I doubt it. My gut says we're getting close. But I still don't see the motive."

"Gotta be money," was Hacker's response. "In this family it couldn't be anything else."

Two more days of scratching brought them no closer. The brokerage firm was flush and upright. Both Lane and Philip's personal finances were under control. Only Lindy spent lavishly, but the money was there to be spent, and apparently she had no restrictions placed on her. As she had smilingly confessed, she seemed to be magnificently spoiled. Skovich's antacid intake increased.

On the third day, after an Italian meatball sandwich for lunch that brought tears to his insides, he was sitting at his desk wondering where to dig next when the phone rang. He picked it up, listened, said, "We're on our way," and leaped to his feet.

"Rosalind Patterson's at the airport," he barked at Hacker. "She wants to talk to us. Sounds skittish, so let's don't waste time."

Rosalind was wearing dark glasses and, after briefly establishing identification, led them quickly and silently to a dark corner table in a VIP lounge. She was tall and willowy, with a languid air. It was easy to see where Lindy had inherited her genes.

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"Now, never mind how I know Gordon has been killed," she began with no formalities. "I've kept an old contact or two. My return flight leaves in less than an hour, so I'll make it brief. First, the ground rules. I won't tell you where I live or what my name is now, and I will not come back for any court proceedings. If we can agree on this, I'll talk to you. If not, it was nice meeting you and goodbye. My information is not about Gordon's murder, but I feel you should have it. Will you agree to my terms?"

"Not without knowing what your information is," Skovich said.

She gave him a faint smile. "Fair enough. All right, I know why Gordon came back."

The detectives exchanged quick glances. "Could that be a possible motive for murder?"

"I don't know. But it is important, enough so that it brought him back where he'd promised not to go."

Skovich thought quickly. "If you're not directly involved in his death, we might be able to work out something regarding your anonymity."

She nodded. "I'm not directly involved, but I may inadvertently have caused it."

Skovich was all attention. "By something you know?"

"By something I know and can prove." Briefly, she touched her heavy handbag. "I have the proof right here."

After a long moment, Skovich nodded. "Okay, you've hooked me. Go ahead."

Rosalind drew a tremulous breath. "Gordon came back because of something I told him recently, something I should have told him years ago."

Skovich looked at her stylish clothing, her perfectly coiffed hair, and remembered Gordon Patterson's tattered garb and wasted body in the morgue.

"Then you and Gordon stayed together?" he asked doubtfully.

He couldn't see her eyes behind the dark glasses, but he suspected there were tears in them. "No," she said simply. "It's what I wanted, but the break with Lane destroyed Gordon. He felt he'd lost everything, and he couldn't keep going. He was broken, sinking down and down until . . . well, you've seen him. You know."

"So what happened recently?"

"I'd lost all contact with him until a few years ago. Somehow he found me. He needed money." Her voice caught. "You see, he refused Lane's money. It's lying in a bank somewhere. It broke my heart to

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see what he'd become. What Lane did to him, to both of us, was so vicious. I felt he should have something, something of his own. So I told him." She drew another breath. "Lindy is his daughter, not Lane's."

Thick silence. At last Hacker said, "So he came back to confront Lane about it."

"No. He came back to see her. That's all he wanted—to see her and tell her. I gave him the money and he came."

Skovich frowned. "But Lindy was four years old when—when you—"

Rosalind's chin tilted defiantly. "Our affair had been going on much longer than Lane knew. Gordon is the only man I ever loved. That's why I had secret tests done when Lindy was born. I was sure that someday we'd marry and I'd need proof of her paternity." She reached into her bag and withdrew a long envelope. "Here it is. You can understand why I don't see her, tell her myself. But now I wonder if she wouldn't like to know."

When Hacker accepted the envelope, Rosalind closed her bag with a snap. "I don't want to know what happens. Losing Gordon and coming back here has been difficult for me. I'm going to leave now. I hope it won't be necessary for us to meet again."

Skovich stood with her. "Thank you," he said. "I don't know what more I can say."

Rosalind said, "You're welcome," and walked away.

Hacker stood up. "Bingo," he said.

Skovich narrowed his eyes in concentration. "We got lucky. The right lead."

"Yeah. Gordon came back to claim the pampered princess."

"And Daddy and Big Brother have spent years protecting and indulging her."

They were moving, falling automatically into step.

"Think it through, think it through," Skovich hissed. "The picture's almost complete. Call Lane and Philip. They've got an appointment with *us* this time."

Once more they were gathered in the study. Lane Patterson's face was set in stone.

"Someone will hear about this," he assured them in frigid tones. "To be summoned from my office like a criminal." His eyes speared Hacker. "Did I understand correctly? If my son and I did not comply, you would have sent officers to bring us here?"

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"Well, not quite," Hacker answered, unruffled. "My partner and I would probably have come ourselves."

"We're extending a courtesy to you, Mr. Patterson," Skovich added. "Your home is more private than your office."

Lane ignored him. "Lindy, you have no business here," he told his daughter. "Please leave us alone."

She stood firm. "Anything that concerns you or Philip concerns me," she said.

Skovich took a deep breath, adrenaline singing inside him. He and Hacker had talked out their theory in minute detail, testing it carefully for wrong turns and dead ends. If they were right, they had a murderer. If not, Lane Patterson had both their posteriors in a sling.

"We've discovered why Gordon returned," he began quietly, letting his gaze rest on each face in turn. "He received undeniable proof that he still had a blood relative who might care about him. He wanted to reestablish a bond." He let the pause grow. "With his daughter."

The silence was so intense that he could hear Hacker's shoes squeak faintly as his partner shifted beside him. All color drained from Lane Patterson's face.

"What—" he began in outrage.

Skovich tapped the envelope he held in his hand. "Clinical proof," he repeated slowly. "You're not Lindy's father. Gordon was."

Philip stared, first at his father, then his sister. "It's got to be—" he whispered.

"No, no mistake," Skovich finished for him. "And Gordon didn't know himself until recently. It brought him back to see her. Now we know he made three telephone calls to this house. Who talked to him?"

Lane Patterson sat down abruptly. "Get out of here," he said thickly. "After all I've already been through, how dare you—"

"You've raised your brother's daughter," Skovich went on calmly. "Drove her mother and father away and raised their little girl."

Lane seemed to be shrinking. "I don't believe it," he managed faintly.

"Nevertheless, it's true."

Beside him, Hacker said, "But we don't think you and Philip knew that Gordon was here. All three phone calls came to your home, not your office. And in the daytime. We don't believe he talked to you."

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All faces turned slowly to Lindy, seated gracefully on the hard wooden bench. Pale pink was creeping up her throat, but she smiled, her eyes guileless and blue. "I don't even remember Uncle Gordon," she said.

"He called you, didn't he?" Skovich asked. "Told you his wonderful news. He wanted to meet you, talk with you. The poor guy hoped that you two could establish a bond, that lost tie between father and daughter. Am I right?"

She laughed, soft and breathless. "Daddy and Philip were the ones who hated him. I didn't even know him."

"And didn't want to, did you?" Skovich pressed her. "Because of what your father might do if he found out."

She didn't answer. Her eyes sought support from her father and brother, but they looked frozen. Her gaze slid back to Skovich. "I—I don't know what you mean."

Philip stirred. "Leave her alone," he ordered unconvincingly. "Lindy, you don't have to talk to them."

"Easier here than at the station," Skovich said, his friendly tone dying. "You were scared, weren't you, Miss Patterson? Scared that your father would throw you out, disown you like he did your mother and Gordon."

Her eyes searched his face. She frowned. "He—he would have."

"Then there'd be no more pretty things, no more luxury. You like being spoiled, don't you? Being rich. Gordon would be taking all that away."

"I said—" she began, and stopped. Her hands rose, gesturing aimlessly. "I told him I didn't believe him. But he kept calling. He said he loved me, that I was all he had left. He wanted to see me. I was afraid if I said no that he'd go to Daddy. So I decided . . ." her voice trailed away.

"You didn't do it yourself, did you?" Skovich prompted gently. "Who did? A friend?"

A slow shake of the head. "I know someone—who knows someone," she whispered.

Even Skovich was jarred. "You *paid* someone to kill Gordon?"

She made no movement, admittance or denial.

"Did you?"

Reluctantly, a slight nod.

"What did you do, tell Gordon you'd meet him at the docks?" Another nod. Skovich couldn't keep the disgust from his voice. "Then sent someone to kill him instead."

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Incredibly, she shook her head. "Yes, but I went, too," the girlish voice said. "I waited in the car."

Lane Patterson moaned softly. Lindy turned to him with a petulant look. "I had to be *sure,* didn't I? Something might have gone wrong."

No one said anything when she finished serenely, "I couldn't let Gordon ruin everything for me."

Skovich and Hacker were in the squad room early the following morning, finishing their reports.

"Sorry it didn't work out between you and Lindy," Skovich said drily as the last period went into place.

Hacker grinned. "Aw, she wasn't my type. Couldn't keep any sharp objects around, you know?"

The arrival of Marty Kroft, bearing a sagging bakery box, was greeted with numerous cries of delight.

"Hey, Hank," Kroft observed, as Skovich elbowed his way to the front of the pack, "you're stepping lively today. You missing something we can't see?"

"It's all over." Skovich beamed through a mouthful of jelly donut. "Boil's gone. Told you I'd take care of it. See, the secret is warm baths. I thought everyone knew that."

He saw Hacker's punch coming and ducked it.

"Old family remedy," he finished triumphantly. "Been handed down for years."

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a ***NEW*** short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

As seems so often to happen, author Bill Bankier has been blessed with talents not only in the literary arts, but in music as well. A self-taught saxophonist and clarinetist, he can also play the recorder and keyboard. Mr. Bankier's lifelong love of music often enters into his stories, as does his interest in poetry, which is evident in this slightly off-beat tale of L.A. . . .

MYSTERIOUS WAYS

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Farley Hagen finished his shift at Billiard City and drove home. He arrived at the cottage on Kester Street in the San Fernando Valley at four-thirty. With Alice not around, there was no pressing need for him to go inside. So after parking the car, he went for a stroll in the direction of the stores on Ventura Boulevard.

Feeling high in the middle of the afternoon was splendid. It was one of the benefits of working in a poolroom. You could develop a buzz on your employer's time. And with nobody to demand explanations, Hagen felt defiantly free.

Astro Liquor had its door propped open. Hagen went inside and bought a six-pack of Bud, a tin of Spanish peanuts, and a giant Hershey's bar. That took care of supper. If the spirit moved him, he might be able to complete the sonnet that had been on his mind that morning before dawn.

Outside on the sidewalk, his attention was drawn to a sheet of paper stapled to a light pole. Somebody had printed a message on it in neat letters:

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WANTED—A Serious Man
To Assist in the Creation of
The One True God
For the Purpose of Punishing
The Wicked
Who Have Begun to Inherit the Earth

There was a telephone number. Hagen repeated it in tempo with his steps all the way home. When he got inside, he wrote it down on the pad Alice had left on the kitchen table. He opened a window. Their last argument, already a week old, still permeated the house like a coat of cheap paint.

When the telephone rang, he knew it was Sheila Lucas. He was good at that. He could visualize his friend, frowning at her fingernails, waiting for him to answer.

"Sheila?"

"How'd you know it was me?"

"Who else would it be?"

"Could be your wife calling from Omaha."

"Alice won't call. She's mad at me."

"She might anyway."

"Forget Alice. She's gone for good."

He could see his wife's face. He could hear her weary voice. "Get a better job! A man with your education. Who says you have to rack balls in a poolroom?" He was tired of telling her the lazy pace suited him. It gave him freedom to think his thoughts.

"I'm gone," Alice had threatened at the climax of the last great fight. "You'll never see me again."

Now Sheila said to him, "Will you be at the Pot this week?" Nathan's Coffee Pot was where they read their poetry aloud.

"Depends."

"On what?"

"Whether I finish anything worth reading. How's your dad?"

"He's getting around okay. The new medication works. Don't worry about my father. He'll bury me."

"He wouldn't enjoy that," Hagen murmured.

He drank a beer, he ate some nuts, he watched the television news. There was so much local crime, such spectacular violence, that reporting it left time for scarcely a mention of European countries tearing each other apart. Hagen believed they were a generation of vipers, himself included.

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The poster telephone number was to hand. A serious man was wanted, to assist in the creation of the One True God. Was that as crazy as it sounded? What if there was money in it?

Too bad there was no money in poetry. Since childhood, since he had learned what it is, Farley Hagen had been able to put down iambic pentameter as quickly as ordinary sentences. Free verse was even easier. He sometimes thought in poetry.

But this did not make him a poet. He had to earn that designation, through hard work and whatever he could bring to the assignment. It would depend on insight and quality of mind. And life's experiences. He might not ever make it.

Still, you never could tell. God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform.

When he dialed the number, the ring was answered instantly. "Alderson."

"I'm responding to your poster."

"Thank you for calling. What do you do?"

"I'm a poet who works in a poolroom."

"That might be enough."

"Can I question something right off the top? You want to create the One True God. But God already exists."

Alderson laughed. There was no derision in it. It was a belly laugh. "Listen to this, Connie," he said, away from the telephone. "The man says God exists!" A woman's voice joined in the merriment. Alderson addressed himself to the caller. "Have you seen any indication lately that there is a Divine Force at work? Never mind persuasive evidence. I'd settle for a hint. A faint whisper. No, if there ever was a God, He must have died or bailed out. Fled to another universe. My own belief is that God never did exist, but we have somehow come up with the concept. Which is a great beginning. All that remains is for us to take the next step. Create the God we've dreamed."

"Why a poet?"

"Why not? We certainly don't want scientists. This is not a job for Dr. Frankenstein. Come and see us. Write down the address and come now. Connie's made blueberry pie."

It was a cottage on Magnolia. Hagen drove past and almost kept on going. The neighborhood was graffiti-scarred. They were dealing dope at both ends of the block. Fed by unaccustomed rains, rhodo-

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dendrons almost hid crumbling stucco walls. Behind cottage windows, orange light dared night to fall.

"I'm Buck Alderson. Come on in." He wore bright red suspenders and a red bow tie. He was the tallest man Hagen had encountered recently. He seized the visitor's hand and led him into the living room with the other arm across his shoulder. It was like a form of country dancing. "Didn't I tell you he'd show, Connie?"

Connie Alderson was positioned at the keyboard of a computer. The blue screen was freckled with white numbers. "He's not the sort to let people down," she said, getting up and heading for the kitchen in loose slippers.

Over bowls of blueberry pie swimming in dark juice, they discussed the project. "Wicked people are doing whatever they want," Alderson said, "and getting away with it. Anything goes. Car-jackings with murder. Insurance fraud. Sarajevo. Killing a tourist in front of her children, in order to steal her purse."

"Of course there's evil. But there's good as well." Hagen's heart was pounding. He wondered if there was something in Connie's pie. "And it's all mixed up. A good person can end up doing a terrible thing. It doesn't mean he's evil."

Connie Alderson was back at her keyboard. She was a robust woman with a back like a barrel. Blue curls touched the rims of glasses tinted pink. "Buck has a bee in his bonnet," she said. "Just take his money and humor the man."

Hagen relaxed. Connie had mentioned money, so all he had to do was wait.

"We need a stroke of creative brilliance that I can't even imagine." Alderson's eyebrows were like wings. "Will you at least try? What you do, as a poet, is so far beyond my comprehension. You can open your mind to a thought no one has entertained before. That's what I'm asking you to do. Think up a supreme being. Arm him with the power to punish wicked men."

As he spoke, Alderson was opening and closing drawers in a desk. He found what he was looking for, a stack of new hundred-dollar bills. He shuffled off what looked like a thousand dollars. Hagen watched with his heart in his mouth.

"I need you to do something for me," Alderson said. He handed over the money. "I want you to buy yourself a few things. Spend a new bill each time. You keep the purchase—bring me the change."

Hagen did not require a lot of time to figure it out. "Is this counterfeit money?"

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Connie said, "Farley never did anything wrong in his life." Her fingers flew as white lines of type appeared on the screen.

"The enterprise needs financing," Alderson said. "If the end is good, would you question the means?"

Most of the tension between Hagen and his departed wife had been brought on by shortage of cash. With enough to spend, she might still have been with him. Alice had grown up with money. Her nest egg paid for the cottage they lived in.

The bills looked convincing. "I'll have to think about it." Hagen put the money in his pocket. "Is that a novel you're writing?" he asked Connie as he got to his feet.

"No, no. It's next month's horoscope for Purple Dancer. She's a three-year-old who's running these days at Santa Anita."

"Horoscopes for horses?"

"I know the animal's date of birth. So I'm able to figure out when the planets will be in the most favorable configuration for her to run a better race." Connie looked wistful. "Some day I hope to be able to offer the service for a fee. Handicappers are desperate for anything that cuts the odds."

The regulars were packed in at Nathan's Coffee Pot. They had filled themselves up with salad and ham croissants. Now the microphone was open and they were getting ready to respond to each other's work.

Hagen let his eye roam both levels of the high-ceilinged room. He saw the men and women as an extended family, a tribe. He knew them all, he was familiar with the clothes each individual wore. The smell in the room, the buzz, contributed to his feeling of security. The only thing missing was a fire on the cave floor and the scream of predators outside in the dark.

Nathan himself got things under way. "Sheila Lucas tells me Farley Hagen is working on a heavy-duty ode. So let us commence with Farley."

The people were generous with their applause. Poets all, they knew what it is to crave appreciation. Sheila's eyes were full to the brim. She was admiring her companion as if he had just got back from the South Pole. Farley moved towards the platform.

"It has no title," he said into the microphone, flinching from the sound of his own voice. Then he began to read from a brand-new notebook.

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I've been told there is no God.
We are on our own.
We struggle in the grasp of blind Fortune, and then—
The end!
Wait, it gets worse.
How's this for a curse?
I have been paid to create the Creator
And turn him loose on the sinners of the world,
So that He can fix their clocks.
Now here's the ironic bit;
The money I was paid is counterfeit.
So why continue to play?
Why give this assignment the time of day?
Well—I went to church till I was twenty-three.
Then I got so busy being me
I had no time
For the religion line.
Then was then, however, and now is now.
So I accept the challenge.
I will strive to create the One True God to govern Man.
I will do the very best I can.
Here goes.
Heeeeellllllp!

The shout Hagen used to conclude the poem jolted his listeners. Their applause was uncertain. Sheila gave him a look as he sat down.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

She made herself small; he felt like putting both arms around her. "That the money you gave me this morning is counterfeit."

Hagen had met Sheila for breakfast. His friend was always hurting for money. It had pleased him to tell her he had been paid up front for an assignment. He enjoyed handing her a hundred-dollar bill. "If I told you, you wouldn't have spent it."

"Farley, I bought some things at Pete's Market. If they catch the bill at the bank, Pete will remember it was me."

He said the only thing he could say. "If the cops come after you, send them on to me."

"That may not help."

"I would never let anything happen to you," he promised her.

On the following day, when he finished his shift at Billiard City, Hagen drove home to find Buck Alderson sitting outside the house

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in a plain brown sedan with Nevada plates. The vehicle had getaway car written all over it.

"How did you find where I live?"

"You're in the telephone book." Alderson shrugged. "I've never been able to figure out why a person would publish his address." He got out of the car. "I'm here to collect the money."

"I only had time to spend three bills." They went inside the house. "I bought that fan for nineteen bucks. And a toaster. And a spare tire for my car." He found a stash of small bills in a cupboard along with the remaining hundreds. He gave it all to Alderson. "Aren't you going to ask me about the poem?"

"How are you making out on the poem?"

Hagen handed over the notebook. "Tell me what you think."

The old man sat at the kitchen table with the book flat in front of him. He held his head in both hands as he concentrated on the lines. Watching him, Hagen saw the schoolboy, trying hard.

"I wish I could stick around," Alderson said when he finished, "and get to know you better."

"Are you leaving?"

"Connie got word from her printer. The cops have begun making a major effort."

"You puzzle me," Hagen said. "You're a crook, right? A con man. A counterfeiter."

"Bogus money is a sideline. I have a number of arrows in my quiver."

"My question is, why the poster on the light pole?"

"I have to locate helpers to get the money out. I wouldn't use people who know me." Alderson looked thoughtful. "There aren't many people who know me."

"But why the God pitch?"

"To attract a certain type. True believers. Get them on board and they'll do anything."

"Then everything you said was tongue-in-cheek. You don't buy any of it."

"Not true. You're confusing this world with the next. A man can be a thief, even a murderer, and still know the difference between right and wrong. I'm a flawed specimen of the human race. But God loves me every bit as much as He does you, my fine-feathered poet."

Hagen remembered what he wanted to say. "By the way, you're short a hundred. I gave one bill to a friend in need."

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"Not smart. Spreading the risk is okay for insurance companies." The old man stuffed the money into a pocket as he moved towards the door. "This is a nice house. Live here alone?"

"My wife is visiting her family in Nebraska."

"You might consider joining her there."

Hagen took the notebook from the table and brought it to where Alderson was standing in the open doorway. "This is yours," he said. "You paid for it."

Alderson tore out the page with writing on it. He ripped it into tiny pieces which he tucked into the palm of Hagen's hand. "Flush this," he said. "It smells like evidence to me."

Sheila Lucas telephoned the following morning. She had been arrested. "I don't know any lawyers," she said.

"They have to provide you with a lawyer."

"The bank spotted the counterfeit bill when Pete made his deposit. He remembered I gave it to him."

"Why are they holding you in jail? You didn't kill anybody."

"They want me to say who gave it to me. Sergeant Ross says fake hundreds have been cropping up all over. The merchants are up in arms."

"What can they do to you?"

"Ross says I can get ninety days. I can't be away from my father that long." Sheila waited. "What should I do?"

"Tell them you got it from me. Give them my address."

Sergeant Bernard Ross was accompanied by a uniformed officer. The detective looked like a Sunday School superintendent. He was a man in his late fifties, wearing a three-piece tan suit with a white pin stripe. His maroon tie was knotted off-center. He wore rimless glasses on a beaky nose and tipped his head back to observe Hagen. Disapproval was his middle name.

"The lady may serve time anyway, whatever you tell us," he said. "She deserves it. Have you any idea how hard storekeepers work to bring in a hundred dollars?"

"I never considered it. The plan was broader than that."

"What plan?"

Hagen described his encounter with Buck Alderson while the detective took notes. He was able to provide street address and telephone number. He concluded by saying, "But I don't think you'll

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find him there. He told me yesterday that he and his wife were leaving town."

"Then your information is not very useful." Ross put away the notebook. "Officer," he said, "put handcuffs on Mr. Hagen."

Incarceration was a devastating experience. Hagen lay on his cot, opening his eyes every now and then to stare at vertical bars. How could this be happening to him? Not that he believed he was without guilt. When he woke up on the second day, he began to wonder if they were poisoning his food.

They must have sent for Alice to fly back from Nebraska. She was somewhere down the corridor. Every fifteen minutes or so, she walked past the cell, pausing long enough to frown in at him. He raised a hand, but she would not return his greeting.

Hagen began to ask himself what was real and what was imagined. His wife, for example, could not possibly be out there in the corridor. He knew better than that. What about Buck Alderson and Connie with her horoscopes for racehorses? The Aldersons had to be real. Their existence explained his presence in prison. Or had he imagined the poster on the light pole, the God Project, the counterfeit money? His poem no longer existed, if he had ever written it. Alderson had torn the page to bits. And, try as he would, he could not remember a line of it.

The fear was real. Hagen felt panic like a coil of barbed wire in his gut. It was a familiar sensation. Whenever he fought with Alice—which was at least once a week—he would experience frustration, then rage. This was followed by overpowering fear. What was he afraid of, that she would leave him? This was her constant threat, but she never followed through. When they married, Hagen was thirty-one years old. He had been living alone since he was twenty. He could do it again, so why dread the possibility?

But the fear came from someplace deeper inside him. To be abandoned would be worse than dying. From a far recess of his memory, Hagen heard his mother's voice. She was downstairs, weeping. His father had slammed the door on the way out. The boy's face was pressed into the pillow, eyes squeezed shut. The anguished cry from below was familiar; she repeated the words like a slogan after every battle.

"I wish I was dead and buried!"

* * *

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Detective Ross waited for the cell-block door to be opened. He had too much to do. He needed help. The counterfeit money case had become nothing but paperwork as far as he was concerned. The Aldersons were out of state by now, somebody else's pigeons. Sheila Lucas and Farley Hagen were small potatoes. Both had clean records, but he was ready to testify that they knew they were passing bogus bills. So they would probably serve minor sentences. There was some satisfaction in that idea.

The iron door rolled aside and Ross walked on through, following the guard, who went on to open the door of Hagen's cell. The prisoner had deteriorated during his days in detention. His eyes were empty.

"I only have a few minutes," the detective said.

"Can we make a deal?"

"Don't waste my time."

"Not for me. I mean Sheila. If I give you information that solves a murder case, will you let her go? She looks after her elderly father. It's wrong for her to be in jail. She didn't know the money was counterfeit."

"What murder?" There were several open files in the department.

"It hasn't been reported." There was a spark of enthusiasm in the prisoner's eyes. Moments ago, he had been like a man near death. Now he seemed to have a reason for living.

Ross sat down. "Tell me about it."

They drove to a location in the Mojave Desert. It was on a feeder road, a mile or two off the main highway to Las Vegas. Hands cuffed behind his back, Hagen pressed his face against the car window, watching for landmarks.

"This is it," he called out. "Stop here!"

They found the shallow grave twenty yards off the road. Animals had not discovered Alice Hagen's remains; the body was undisturbed. Ross called for the wagon on the cruiser radio. Then they waited. Hagen thought about Sheila, who would soon be out of jail. He recalled a story they had studied in school. The doomed hero said, "It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done."

"Why did you kill her?" Ross asked.

"Because I had to."

"She was cheating on you?"

"Nothing as obvious as that." They had removed the cuffs. Hagen was able to rest his chin in both hands as he sat in the open doorway

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of the parked car with his boots on sand. He was experiencing great relief. "She was my victim."

"I don't follow you," the detective said.

"Don't you get it?" Hagen felt like a teacher explaining a premise to a slow student. Better than that; he was God handing down universal wisdom. He knew all about the real world that exists alongside the world of fantasy. And he understood that the two become one and the same from time to time.

"I am not a promiscuous killer," he said in a dignified tone of voice. He felt ten feet tall. "I was put on this earth to murder my wife. That was our destiny."

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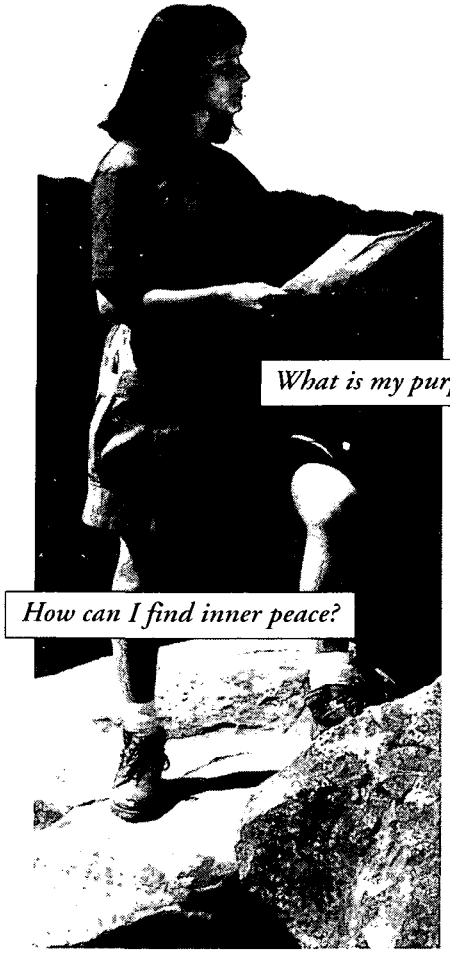

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For a first story with a remarkably clever plot, we turn to a writer from Chelmsford, England who appears to have crime writing in his blood. Philip Lovesey is the son of EQMM *Readers Award winner Peter Lovesey, and we expect this first publication will be just the beginning of a long career . . .*

THE CONTRACT

by PHILIP LOVESEY

Nothing is certain but the unforeseen.

A builder's board was outside the pub, propped against a beer keg with geraniums growing out of it.

S. BOGGIS & SON
Builder & Decorator

Paul Clarke swung his silver Lotus close and stared. This was definitely the Ring of Bells. He parked the car, tossed his jacket over his shoulder, and crunched across the gravel to the entrance. Three P.M. precisely.

The smell of fresh paint made his eyes smart. There was a dust-sheet over the doormat. He hesitated. Then a voice from the interior called out, "Come on in, sir! Business as usual."

If this was usual, Clarke thought when he stepped inside, it could hardly be described as business. He was the only customer. He approached the bar.

The smile from across the freshly varnished counter was warm, welcoming. "Yes, it's quieter than usual. We've given the place a face-lift, as you see, and word hasn't reached the regulars that it's open again. They'll be down the road in the Fox, and regretting it. You're the first to see the Bells in its full glory. In fact, you must have a complimentary drink to mark the occasion."

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Clarke nodded his thanks and looked around the room. "They appear to have done a decent job."

"So what will you have, sir?"

"A whisky, Mr. Porter."

It was amusing to see his genial host gape in surprise.

Clarke added, "In water—bottled water, please—with one ice cube, no more. I spotted your name on the license-board above the door. Sidney Porter, right?"

"No, my friend." The little man behind the counter recovered his poise sufficiently to say, "No one calls me Mr. Porter. Sid will do." He lifted a tumbler to the whisky optic, added the single ice cube, and set it down on the bar with a bottle of Swedish mineral water. "Are you in the building trade?"

"Why do you ask?" said Clarke, surprised.

"The way you looked at the work. An expert eye. Am I right?"

"Not far off. Cheers." He took a long sip of the drink. "Is there a pay phone I can use?"

It was pointed out to him, against the wall just inside the door. He felt in his suit pocket for some change and produced a handful of coppers. "You can never find the bloody coins you want."

His new friend Sid opened the till behind him and took out two silver ten-pence pieces.

"Thanks. I'll settle with you presently."

As Clarke extended his hand for the coins, Sid delayed passing them across. He was examining Clarke's fingers. "Looking at those, I'd say it was a long time since you used a hammer. You said 'not far off' to my question about the building trade. Let's see now. Judging by its shape and size, the metal object making a lump in the right pocket of your jacket may well be a steel rule. Your dark suit and your confident manner—not to mention the smart car outside—lead me to the conclusion that you have a managerial position. *Ergo* you head your own company specializing in interior decoration."

Clarke could not fail to be impressed by the Holmesian demonstration. "You're remarkably close to the truth." He took a business card from his wallet.

"Paul Clarke. Radiator Covers," Sid read aloud. "Not bad. It has to be said, Mr. Clarke, that I'm not often wrong. I've developed the knack over the years and often have a game with myself figuring people out. Harmless."

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Clarke took his drink to the phone. "I must tell my wife to put the dinner on hold," he explained. "I've been visiting friends in Heathfield and tried a short cut and got hopelessly lost. These lanes of yours all look the same to me." Ironically, when he spoke into the phone it wasn't his wife who was listening. There was only Sid the sleuth, watching him intently. The words were recorded on the answering machine.

"Bloody things. I hate talking to a machine," he said as he returned to the bar. He downed the whisky and took a credit card from his leather wallet. "The first drink was on the house, but I insist that I return the compliment. Have one yourself and the same again for me." He handed across the plastic card. "Could you charge me twenty and let me have some change, Sid? You do take these things?"

"We do now," said Sid. "Part of the new image. The machine's upstairs with a sheaf of counterfoils. Excuse me a moment." He went through a white door behind the bar.

Paul Clarke drummed his fingertips on the bar and tried to compose himself. Despite the amiable conversation, the amateur detective made him uneasy.

When Sid returned some minutes later he wore a thoughtful expression, as if some unexplained problem had surfaced. He set down the credit-card machine and tried ham-fistedly to use it, only succeeding at the second attempt. Then he poured the drinks and together they toasted the redecorated Ring of Bells.

"Radiator covers—why would anyone want to cover a radiator?" enquired Sid.

"Don't you know what they are?" said Clarke, taking out his wallet. "Take a look at this photo. My own flat in Hampstead. See how a well-designed cover can enhance a humble radiator, turning an everyday object into a visual centerpiece."

Sid took out his reading glasses for a closer inspection. "Who's the lady—a model?"

"My wife Sophie." Clarke swallowed his second drink at a gulp. "I'm getting a proper brochure printed and we'll use professional models for that. I'm expanding, Sid. I've got three good workers who are as committed to the business as I am. And a dynamic young sales rep full of ideas. Yes, I'm doing my bit to reduce the unemployment rate."

The phone behind the bar suddenly shrilled.

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"Ring of Bells," said Sid into the mouthpiece. "A Mr. Owen Knight, sir? Don't know him. . . . No point, sir. He isn't in the bar, but if you'd care to leave your—" The sentence was never completed. The caller had hung up.

"Problem?" asked Clarke, returning the photo to his wallet and preparing to leave.

"Most peculiar. Can't have been a wrong number because he asked to speak to Owen Knight after I told him the name of the pub. He wouldn't leave a message." Sid rubbed his chin.

"Sounds like another case for you to solve," said Clarke, sliding off the bar stool. "I'm off now."

Sid slapped his hand on the bar. "Got it! Owen Knight. The initials. O.K. It's a message for you, Mr. Clarke. It tells you everything is okay. Oh, Mr. Clarke, I've been so dense. You know how it is when you're so close to something that you can't see for looking?"

Paul Clarke nodded politely as he grasped the door handle.

"I've got you figured out, sir," Sid called across the room to him. "You're trying to use me, and I'm not having it."

Clarke hesitated by the door, disturbed by the sudden injection of hostility. It was lucky no one else was present. He tried for a dignified exit line. "Sorry, friend, I don't know what you're talking about and I really must get on the road. My wife will wonder where on earth I got to."

"Your wife is dead, Mr. Clarke."

He stared in horror. *"What?"*

"If you open that door I'll call the police," shouted Sid. "I noted the number of your car."

Clarke fumbled for words. "Look, Mr. Porter," he said, "I really don't know what you're talking about."

Sid's voice took on a calmer tone. "If I'm mistaken, sir, I apologise. I'd hate to leave it like this. Could we take a moment to sort this out?"

Clarke relaxed somewhat and approached the bar again. Sid had taken a bottle of malt whisky from behind him and filled two glasses.

"What made you call at the Ring of Bells?" he asked. The words were quietly spoken, but the directness of the question ambushed Paul, as if it was the start of an interrogation.

"Why not? It's a pub. I was off my route and I wanted to use a phone."

Sid pushed the glass of whisky across and then stabbed the space between them with a pointing finger. "That, sir, is why I first sus-

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pected you." He folded his arms and leaned challengingly across the no man's land of the bar counter. "I saw your car, a silver Lotus, pass straight by just a few seconds before you returned and parked here."

"So I turned and came back. What's wrong with that?"

"Indeed you did, sir," said Sid with the air of a man who has much to reveal. "This is a tiny village. More of a hamlet really. Just fifteen houses, a general store, and the two pubs. No turning point, you see. There is only one possible place where you could have reversed your vehicle." He used the word vehicle with relish, as the police do when investigating traffic offences. "I mean the car park of the Fox."

Clarke said reasonably, "I haven't the faintest idea what you are implying."

"Nothing yet. I'm just curious to know why you didn't call at the Fox. You must have seen that it contains most of the male population of the village."

Clarke sipped at the whisky without enjoying it. "I don't like crowds."

"I see. The shy felon."

"This has gone far enough, Mr. Porter. It's idle speculation which you, no doubt, find amusing, but which amounts to a string of slanderous remarks and a waste of my time. I've finished talking to you."

"Then you'll be talking to the police," said his inquisitor.

Clarke pushed away the glass, spilling some on the counter. "The *police?* What are you going to tell them—that a stranger chose your pub rather than the Fox and led you to the obvious conclusion that he had done away with his wife? They'd charge you with wasting their time."

Spacing his words, Sid said, "My remark to you, Mr. Clarke, was that she is dead, not that you have done away with her."

For a moment neither spoke. Then Paul Clarke said, "That old gag! You want to change your reading habits. You made it perfectly obvious what you're insinuating."

"I notice that you're still here."

"I'm concerned to discover how you reached this ludicrous conclusion. I'm intrigued by the ramblings of your peculiar mind. Tell me what evidence you have that would warrant such a waste of police time."

Sid put the glass to his lips and made him wait. "It's this business of the phone, Mr. Clarke. Our pay phone is a unique piece of machin-

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ery in Lower Mayfield. The Fox doesn't have one. It has a private line, of course, but no public phone."

"And . . . ?"

"Anyone would assume that a fair-sized house like the Fox would have one. Having driven into their car park, you could have gone in and enquired. You did not. You came straight here."

"I simply preferred the look of your pub," said Clarke in exasperation.

"I can understand that, sir. Let me explain." Sid paused, as if getting the facts in the right order. "You recall that I went upstairs to fetch the credit-card machine?"

Clarke nodded and looked at his watch.

"I have a good view of the car park from up there. I couldn't help noticing that your beautiful sports car is fitted with one of those short, black, rubber aerials—the type associated with a car phone. And from my bird's-eye view, Mr. Clarke, I could clearly see the phone itself, in position between the front seats. Why didn't you use it to call home?"

"It's obvious you haven't used a car phone," Clarke replied with spirit. "They're bloody dangerous. These country lanes are bad enough without negotiating hairpin bends with one hand on the wheel."

"So why not pull into a passing point and make your call from there?"

"Because I didn't realize I was lost until I came to the sign 'Lower Mayfield—Please Drive Carefully' at the top of the damn street."

"That sounds plausible," admitted Sid, scratching his head thoughtfully.

"Satisfied? Am I free to go at last?" said Clarke with commendable restraint.

"In a word, no," said Sid, reaching under the bar. "Unless, that is, you want to take a chance with this."

Paul Clarke stared in amazement at the shotgun held just inches from his chest. He'd never been at the wrong end of a gun before. His knees shook. It was as if someone had poured a bucket of icy water down his back.

Sid was becoming more assertive by the second. "Sit down, Mr. Clarke. This little beauty is loaded. I'm not a bad shot, but cartridges are messy and I'd rather not spoil the new furnishings. I just want to keep you here until we settle this. After I'd spotted your car phone I took the liberty of phoning your credit-card company, as I'm

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entitled to do, just to check. They weren't very reassuring about your status. In fact, your credit card isn't worth the plastic it's made from. Not quite the buoyant businessman you claim to be, are you?"

"If you want cash for the drinks, you shall have it," Clarke offered frantically. "Is that what all this was about?"

"I wish for poor Mrs. Clarke's sake it was, sir."

Clarke reached for his wallet and scooped out a ten-pound note and pushed it towards his accuser. "Here. Hard cash. Satisfied? Or do you want to check the serial number with the Treasury?"

Sid looked at the note and smiled. "My point exactly. Why didn't you pay cash in the first place? You and I know why you behaved so oddly. It was to establish a cast-iron alibi." He studied Clarke's face with cruel amusement. He still hadn't lowered the gun.

"I've never heard anything so preposterous," said Clarke. "I'll tell this one at a dinner party and they'll say I'm lying."

"I'm certain you're lying," said Sid. "Let's lay it out, shall we? Point One: you prefer an empty pub to a full one. Point Two: you make a point of addressing me by name. Point Three: you order a drink as if you're bloody James Bond. Point Four: you prefer my pay phone to your car phone. Point Five: you leave a message on your answer phone to establish where you are. Point Six: you give me your business card. Point Seven: you use a credit card just to get the Ring of Bells printed on the counterfoil. To sum up, you make damn sure I'm going to remember your visit and we both have written proof of it. I put it to you, Mr. Clarke, that there isn't a jury in the land who could be convinced that you were anywhere else but the Ring of Bells, Lower Mayfield, between three and three-thirty on Saturday, April twenty-seventh, nineteen ninety-three."

A serious response was necessary, for the man was in earnest. Trying to ignore the twin barrels of the gun, Clarke set his hands on the counter and sat straight on the stool. "How can I put this so that you understand? If I'd bought a chocolate bar from your post-office shop I would have bought myself an alibi—had I required one for some arcane reason. I'm a stranger here. Anyone would remember my face, my car, even the way I speak. I didn't stop at the shop because I wanted a drink, and to save you asking again, as a stranger I didn't fancy the crowded atmosphere in the Fox."

"Explain the phone call, then."

Clarke sighed. "We've been over that."

"Not the call you made, Mr. Clarke. The mysterious incoming call for Owen Knight. The call that prompted you to get up from that

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stool and make for the door. That call was a signal, an all-clear signal, and its point of origin was your flat in London."

Clarke smiled, and the smile gave way to a chuckle that became a full-blown laugh. "You know, you're a terrific turn, Mr. Porter. To think that if I'd stopped at the Fox I would have missed this performance."

"It's no performance, and I asked you to address me as Sid."

"That's a crime, too, is it? All right, Sid, do you have one jot of evidence to support your hypothesis?"

"The photograph of your wife. So convenient."

"It's a photo of my product, for pity's sake. My wife is just there as a model, to enhance it."

"A sales aid?" said Sid.

Believing he was making some impact at last, Clarke delved into his pocket again. "I can show you more, if you want, without Sophie. She isn't in every one." He started scattering photos on the counter. "Look, every radiator cover in the goddamn flat. Satisfied?"

Sid actually lowered the gun and rested it on a shelf below the counter. He examined the pictures minutely. "So the front door opens onto this narrow hallway, with the first door on the left being a bedroom?"

"Right."

He played with the prints as if they were pieces in a jigsaw. "The through-lounge? The kitchen-diner?"

Clarke nodded.

"Then it's a map," said Sid. "An assassin's guide to the layout of your home."

This time Clarke was unfazed. "Come on, you can't have it both ways. Just now you were saying my wife was the significant feature."

"She is in this shot—with the pearls she's wearing. They're the real thing, aren't they? A double rope. She must have had those before she married you last August."

Paul Clarke stared at him. "How do you know when I was married?"

He picked up another of the prints. "This close-up of the radiator cover in your bedroom shows a charming informal wedding picture nicely displayed on the top. Outside Hampstead Registry Office—am I right?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"But you admit I am right?"

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"Yes."

"Just that my son spends some time in Hampstead and I happen to know that this old building closed in September."

"Yes, but—"

"And the car your bride is pictured climbing into is a K registration. They started issuing them last August first. Disappointing, isn't it, when it's explained?" He counted on his fingers. "Married only eight months, God rest her soul."

"You're sick," said Clarke bitterly. "Does this amuse you—tormenting your customers? Is that the real reason no one drinks here?"

The little man took out a cigar and went through the routine of unwrapping the paper and lighting the end. It glowed strongly before he exhaled and watched the smoke swirl up to his freshly painted ceiling. "Let's retrace the events since that wedding day. You had a short honeymoon—I don't know where—"

"Remarkable!"

". . . and then you moved up-market into Sophie's spacious flat in trendy Hampstead. The pictures are obviously of a place furnished by a single lady, a lady of money. A fine catch for the humble radiator-cover salesman. I am willing to hazard that you both visited a solicitor quite soon, to arrange for Sophie's property to become jointly owned."

Clarke muttered an obscenity.

"Sadly for the marriage," Sid continued, "the world recession took its toll. The business was on the skids. You were losing money. Instead of slimming down the business, selling your handsome new car, laying people off, you decided expansion was the key. A new brochure, larger premises. Tragically, Sophie didn't see it your way, nor did the bank."

"Where are the facts, man?" Clarke demanded angrily. "This is all speculation."

"I'm weighing the possible motives," Sid answered with a wave of the cigar. "Was she insured, I wonder? Or did you have plans to sell the Hampstead flat? It's enough, really, that you stood to inherit a substantial fortune. Sophie had to die, and soon."

Clarke rolled his eyes to show how ludicrous all of this was. "It's the money motive, is it? Have you considered a *ménage à trois,* or a deal with Satan? Voices in my head? Something with the same degree of manic inconsistency as the rest of this?"

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Sid shook his head. "Pure greed, allied to ambition. You made up your mind to kill her and it became a question of how it was done. A man in your position would be the prime suspect for this cruel and callous act. It was vital that no one should hold you responsible. A fatal accident was the answer, an accident which occurred when you were far, far away."

Paul Clarke resorted to humouring the man. "This, presumably, was why the cast-iron alibi was necessary."

"Exactly, sir. Mind, I have some understanding for your predicament. My son Davey works in the building trade. Cut-throat, he calls it. He's a big enough lad to look after himself, I'm glad to say, with a smart head on his shoulders to match. Greatly in demand, is Davey. But I digress. You needed a professional killer, a hit man. Right?"

Clarke said nothing and gave nothing away.

"You must have had a double set of those photos printed for the hit man to have his guide to the flat and its flimsy security. You used the photographs as bait, to convince him that you could deliver your end of the deal. What better bait than the photo of Sophie wearing her pearls? Pearls are so easy to restring and dispose of."

Still Clarke was silent, as if waiting for Sid to play every card in his hand.

"You needed a plan, of course. Forgive me, Mr. Clarke, but I don't think you were the strategist in this operation. You shouldn't have shown me those photos. Anyway, a date was fixed. Today. You took your trip to Heathfield. At about the time you pulled into this car park, the hit man was entering the flat in Hampstead by means of a key you'd given him. His first action was to turn on the answering machine in the hall. Then he concealed himself in the bedroom opposite. You called home from here, the phone rang, Sophie went to answer it, and *Pow!*" Sid banged his fist down on the bar. "Struck down like a beast in a slaughterhouse. Before her demise, she might just have heard you telling her not to worry, you'd soon be home. How am I doing, sir? Can I top up your glass?"

Clarke shook his head.

Sid topped up his own and went on, "The killer will have helped himself to the pearls, I'm sure, and a few other items of jewelry, as well as messing the place about to leave the impression of a burglary. Then he left the flat and used a public phone to send you the Owen Knight message. The rest will be up to you, if you have the nerve. You have the alibi, but do you have the nerve? You return

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home to find your dear wife is the victim of the most appalling murder in the furtherance of theft. You call the police. In a few weeks' time the insurance money for the stolen items is sent to you. Naturally, you sell the flat, with its painful memories. Your business moves to larger premises and those new glossy brochures are delivered the length and breadth of the land."

"If this had an atom of truth," said Clarke, "you'd still have to explain why yours—of all the pubs in England—was chosen for this plot. Why the Ring of Bells?"

"That question puzzled me, I admit," Sid confessed, his brow furrowed in concern. "It wasn't your idea, I know, or you wouldn't have driven past the place the first time. No, sir, the killer chose the Ring of Bells. Maybe he has a perverse sense of humour. My son is always saying that it's rich that this is the pub with the only pay phone in the village. All of which leads me to conclude that your partner in crime knows a great deal about Lower Mayfield and its pubs. The bastard may be a local man. He may even have drunk at this bar, weighing us up, deciding that we fitted his deadly plan."

"I've heard more than enough of this bilge," said Clarke.

"Thinking of driving back to Hampstead tonight, sir?" said Sid. "How long will it take? An hour and a half, at least. If I pick up my phone and call Scotland Yard, I can find out whether it's bilge or not. You could have an interested reception committee waiting when you get there. However"—he flicked ash off the cigar—"I have a proposition."

"You intend to blackmail me with this moonshine?"

"Please, Mr. Clarke, hear me out. To sum up, your alibi has collapsed. You have to persuade me to do nothing about it. I've got the gun handy, so I can look after myself."

"Go on," said Clarke.

"You're listening now, my friend, aren't you? I can't save Mrs. Clarke. I'm certain she's already dead. I've got you dangling on a hook." He drew on the cigar, regarding Clarke with interest. "Is it to be the police, or shall I return my catch to the murky waters it came from? Your car keys, Mr. Clarke, will buy my silence."

"My *car?* You want my bloody car? You're out of your mind."

"Listen carefully, sir. You don't have much time. There's a footpath behind the pub. Leave by the back door and you'll cross a field and rejoin the main road without being seen. Turn left and follow the road for a mile and a half to Birch Green, where they have a public call box in the street. Phone the AA and tell them you have

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broken down just outside Birch Green. Wait twenty minutes and then phone the police and report that your car has been stolen. Some greedy opportunist must have driven it off while you were phoning the AA. Most unfortunate. The police arrive presently and find you understandably distressed, but the crucial thing is this, Mr. Clarke: it's all on record now, and the witnesses to your whereabouts couldn't be bettered. Of course there's little they can do to find the missing vehicle except make a few routine enquiries to satisfy the insurance. Car thefts are endemic. Seeing that you're so inconvenienced, they'll see that you get to Sevenoaks Station and so to London. Wearily, you arrive home, but—this is important—you must remember to erase the message on the answering machine, as it plays no part in your new alibi. The rest of the plan runs as you had it. You discover your poor wife's body and dial the emergency number. Now may I have the keys?"

Sid put out his hand.

Paul Clarke stared back, scanning the pale blue, expressionless eyes for some sign of weakness, some hint that this was only a cruel game, that he was the third customer this week who had fallen for it.

Sid's gaze remained steady.

Reluctantly, Clarke reached into his jacket pocket, his eyes never leaving Sid's. The action seemed to take an age. Eventually he placed the key-fob into the waiting hand and saw the fingers curl possessively around it.

"I've drunk more than the limit," Clarke muttered. "Shouldn't drive."

"Sensible," said Sid. "Walk it off before you meet a policeman, eh?"

"I'd like to be certain that this is the end of your theorizing, Mr. Porter."

"Sid."

"Sid, then."

"You can depend on me. And please, don't mention my name to anybody, will you?" His gaze turned towards the car park. "I have my own reason for being discreet now."

Sid watched as Paul Clarke left the Ring of Bells and started along the footpath across the field. Then he busied himself tidying up, washing the glasses, emptying the ashtray, and returning the shotgun to its usual position out of sight under the counter.

In twenty minutes a tall, bearded man entered.

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"The worst afternoon's racing I've ever known, Sid," he said, walking straight behind the bar and hanging his overcoat on the white hook next to the crisps and snacks. "Still, it was a break. I can't thank you enough for stepping in and giving me the time off, Mr. Boggis."

Sid gave a shrug. "I enjoyed it, Mr. Porter. A change from decorating. I think I could make a passable barman, given the opportunity."

"I don't suppose you were inundated with customers."

"Nobody to speak of."

"Whose is the smart car, then?"

"That?" said Sid, glancing outside. "That's mine. Just acquired. I got it for a song, too."

"I never get to hear about bargains," said Porter. "Who put you onto it?"

"My son Davey."

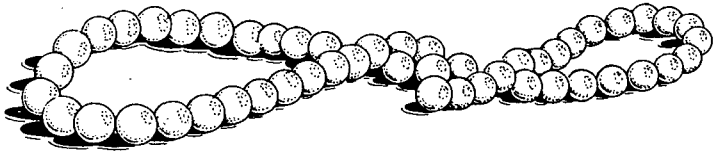
"Ah—Boggis and Son."

"Yes. Davey was a damned good decorator in his time, but he's a sales rep now. Travels all over, selling radiator covers. In fact, you met him two or three weeks ago."

Porter tapped his chin thoughtfully. "I remember him. Big, broad-shouldered fellow with red hair, right? I had to tell him the place needed redecorating before I invested in radiator covers, but he stopped for a drink."

"And I came in to offer my services the very next day," said Sid, grinning. "Now it can be told."

Porter chuckled. "Boggis and Son. You're a smart pair of operators. I reckon you make a killing between you."



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a *NEW* short story by

HENRY SLESAR

Henry Slesar's cleverly plotted stories have been gracing the pages of EQMM *for nearly five decades. Next month he begins a new feature for us, a series of minute mysteries entitled "The Final Paragraph," done in the style of those miniature gems of the forties, with puzzle and solution complete in a mere five hundred words. The author assures us that he will also continue to provide us with longer tales like the following . . .*

THE OTHER WOMAN

by ***HENRY SLESAR***

She was braced for prison pallor, but when Joey bounced into the visitors' room on the springy heels of his Reeboks there was a healthy outdoor glow on his cheeks. Joey had always coveted his suntan, and Tammy Simms had a quick vision of a prison quadrangle with her husband leaning against a brick wall, his face yearning towards the hot sun burning over the machine-gun turrets. She was wrong. There were no machine guns, no turrets, and no quadrangle.

"Badminton," Joey grinned at her. "We had the semi-finals this morning, and guess who was numero uno?"

"Badminton," Tammy repeated.

"All I've got to do is beat an overweight embezzler tomorrow, and I'm the champ. Next week, softball. Inside Traders versus the Manslaughterers." He chuckled at her expression. "Come on, don't look so surprised. You know what minimum security means, don't you?"

"I thought it meant fewer guards. Screws, isn't that what they're called?"

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"You've seen too many prison movies, babe. It's not like that around here." The small tanned face darkened. "But it's still a prison. I can't wait for next June when I walk out of here."

"June?" she said, trying to keep the dismay out of her voice. "That's only, what, eleven months?"

"Bromberg says it's a given." Joey showed small white teeth against his tan. "I'll have served half the sentence by then, I'm a sure thing for parole. Good behavior, great stats." He laughed, happy again. "And then what a time we'll have. We won't have to rent that beach house on Statia, we'll buy it outright. And a catamaran. I always wanted to own one of those babies. All the good things money can buy, Tammy—"

The conversational topic worried her, and she looked around furtively. "Don't talk about money," Tammy said. "What if they bug these tables or something?"

"Nobody cares what we say." He seized her hand. "And all I care about is wiping that scared look off your face. Everything's perfect, Tammy, it's just like I said it would be. I'll be out next summer and we'll have the time of our lives, like I promised."

"On a dead man's money," she said, no longer hiding the rancor she felt.

"What good is the money to Marty?"

"It might do his family some good."

"His family?" Joey dropped her hand. "What do you know about Marty's family? I'm not even sure he had one."

"There were some people at his funeral."

"You went to the *funeral?* Jeez, that was a dumb thing to do! What if somebody saw you?"

"Somebody did," Tammy said nervously. "A woman. I was all the way in the back of the room, I didn't even go near the coffin. But there was this woman there, a kind of hard-looking blonde, and she turned around and stared at me like she had eyes in the back of her head. I left as soon as I could."

"I don't know, I don't know," Joey said, chewing his thumbnail. "Maybe it was okay, your being there. It fits with everything else, you caring about Marty, paying your last respects and all . . ."

"Didn't you hear what I said about the woman?"

"Forget about her. All the mourners were from the office, maybe a couple of buyers from out of town. If Marty had a family, they were back in Pennsylvania. I think he was divorced, separated, something like that."

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"I still think it was his wife," Tammy said. "She was too—I don't know, too damned *solemn* to be just some secretary or buyer. And the way she looked at me . . . I think she knew who I was, Joey!"

"So what?"

"Don't you understand? She knew I was—the Other Woman. She must have seen my picture, in the *News,* or on Channel Nine."

"So she was curious," Joey said. "You're a kind of celebrity, babe, let's face it. A fifteen-minute celebrity."

"*But it wasn't the only time.* I saw her again, just yesterday morning. Sitting in a parked car, right on our block. I walked by her, made believe I didn't recognize her. But I did."

"You're paranoid," Joey said. He pushed his sun-dark face closer to hers, the face she had once considered handsome. "You were always paranoid, Tammy. It's a bad habit."

"I had a right to be," she said bitterly. "Living with you ten years. Never knowing when the next guy at the door was going to be a cop, or some Mafioso bill-collector."

"Only they never showed up, did they?" Now the small white teeth looked like those of a ferocious animal. "That's what I mean by paranoia, honey. You never gave me credit for being too smart for trouble."

"Yes," Tammy said. "You're smart, all right. That's why you're the badminton champ of the prison."

"It could have been worse," he said, in the quiet, furry tone she hated most of all. "I could have been in the big joint upstate, where the games are a whole lot rougher. And I wouldn't be sitting on a million bucks." He barked a laugh. "A million ten by the time I get out, babe. Compound interest!"

The bus ride home was three hours long, but the paperback she had brought with her remained closed on her lap. She was sorry now that she had decided on this visit; it was her mother who talked her into it, sending guilty vibrations the length of the telephone wires between New York and Atlanta. Of course, her mother believed what everyone else believed, that Tammy herself was responsible for poor Joey's three-year manslaughter rap; a conjugal visit was the least she owed him. She didn't argue with her. It was a novelty to hear her mother speak kindly of her son-in-law.

That was the irony of it all, Tammy thought: Mother Knew Best. She had warned her about marrying Joey a decade ago, she had seen right through the sleek, excessive charm. He was a man who

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didn't have "jobs," he had "plans." Tammy had watched a dozen of those plans end up in hasty moves from hotel rooms and rented apartments in five cities. She had observed the declining standard of his "business" associates, from sweaty entrepreneurs to shifty-eyed hoodlums. She had heard less and less of his "plans" as they became more and more illegitimate, but she knew what he was up to in New York, the garment district scam that actually seemed to work, that put bread on the table and provided airfare to the Caribbean.

It was simple enough, given the high level of venality in the trade. There were half a dozen delivery men willing to wheel their dress racks down Seventh Avenue to empty trucks on Tenth, and the risk was minimal since the manufacturers involved were only too happy to trade the surety of insurance money to the uncertainty of a depressed market. But then Joey, a small-time player at best, found another opportunity. The owner of a junior miss company, eager to retire to Sarasota, offered Joey the business for an irresistible price. It was still more than Joey could afford, but fate was on his side. He met Marty Watts.

Marty had moved to New York only recently. He had sold a tool and dye business in Pennsylvania and was sitting on the proceeds. He was also sitting alone in a penthouse apartment in a new West Side high-rise that was only one-third rented. Looking at his balding head in the shiny new bathroom mirror. Staring out at the New York skyline, fifty-two years old and wondering what to do with the rest of his life. One night, in a bar, he made the mistake of sharing his dilemma with a well-tanned stranger.

Tammy never met Marty, because her husband played the singles game with him. He took him to nightclubs and restaurants in the company of showroom models and shapely secretaries who seemed to be in abundance on the Street. He played Marty's loneliness like a violin. When he finally told Tammy about Marty, Joey used the word "schnook," Seventh Avenue for patsy, and Tammy had a premonition of trouble ahead.

The Port Authority Bus Terminal was teeming with unsavory people, but Tammy paid them no attention, her mind too busy reading the diary of her past, wishing she could change every page. She didn't close the book until the cab pulled up at the apartment building just off Columbus Avenue, and she saw the tan Volvo parked across the street, the hard-looking blonde at the wheel, staring straight ahead as if waiting for a traffic signal.

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She substituted speed for panic, throwing a bill at the driver and dashing into the building lobby before Vinnie had a chance to open the door for her. She started for the elevator, but turned back to ask the doorman a question.

"Yeah, that's the funny thing," he said, always eager for conversation. "That car's been parked across the street for the last two hours. Guess her boyfriend didn't show up." He grinned wetly.

In the apartment, Tammy didn't turn on the lights. Instead, she went to the living-room window. It afforded her a partial view of the street that would have included at least the hood of the Volvo. But it wasn't there. She let out the breath she had been holding all the way upstairs.

She was hungry. She hadn't eaten since breakfast, and then only a cup of coffee and a stale muffin. She went to the kitchen, already knowing there would be nothing at all in the cupboards or the refrigerator. She had suspended all domestic obligations, including grocery shopping, since Joey got his sentence. There were three neighborhood restaurants in which she had become a familiar figure. She decided on Spot's, where the smaller tables were in the darkest corners. Before she left, she checked the window again. No Volvo.

She was sipping a rum and Coke when the woman came into the restaurant. Spot's was three blocks and an alleyway from her apartment door, from the parking space the blonde had occupied for two hours, so there was no question of coincidence. The woman had followed her. Tammy's fingers went icy around the drink in her hand, and her eyes snapped around the room looking for escape routes. She had gotten the dark corner she wanted, all right, but now it was a trap, a cul-de-sac.

The blonde didn't wait to be shown to a table, she picked her own, so close to Tammy's that she would have to brush the shoulder of her tailored suit in order to leave. She was making an effort not to meet Tammy's eye, but the effort itself was a giveaway. She sat down and slung her large cloth handbag around the chair back, creating still another obstacle. But Tammy, her appetite gone, wasn't about to become the object of that hard blue-eyed gaze. She dug some bills out of her purse, tossed them on the table, and stood up. There was no other path to the door but the one behind the blonde, and Tammy moved so rapidly that her hip collided with the cloth bag. The strap slid over the tapered chair rail and the bag dropped to the floor. She couldn't resist the impulse to pick it up.

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When she did, her hand traced the unmistakable outline of a gun.

Now there was only room for panic. She fought her way through the maze of tables towards the door. A party of six was entering, blocking her way, making jokes about the food that may have caused her wild-eyed exit. She pushed her way through them like a linebacker.

When she reached the street, she saw the Volvo parked on the corner and for the first time thought of checking out the license plate. It was blue, and its slogan was "Keystone State." Pennsylvania. If there had been the slightest question in her mind, it was gone. The woman was *her,* and the gun in her purse signified only one intention. If not now, later. If not in the open, then in sudden ambush. The prospect of never-ending fear was worse than the thought of death. Tammy stopped and looked back at the restaurant entrance, and just as she expected, the woman was emerging. Her heels rang out hard on the pavement, but Tammy didn't move as she approached.

When the woman was in hearing distance, Tammy said: "Wait a minute. I think we have to talk."

If the sudden confrontation surprised her, the steely blue eyes gave no sign. She was younger than Tammy had supposed; it was experience that had carved the lines around her eyes and mouth, not age. Those lines shifted, and her mouth thinned.

"I'm still hungry," the woman said flatly. "And all you had was that drink."

"And I need another," Tammy said. "Not here, though. There's a quieter place, right down the street." She looked toward the buzzing neon sign that read "Kasey's."

"All right, Mrs. Simms."

The sound of her name on the woman's lips was chilling.

There were only two other tables occupied in Kasey's, and only a four-item menu. Tammy asked for another rum and Coke, and the blonde ordered a club sandwich but let it sit untouched on her plate as Tammy told her what she had to tell.

"I know what you think of me," she said. "You think I'm some kind of tramp, a bimbo, that's what the newspaper said without *saying* it, you know what I mean? And you think it's my fault that Marty Watts is dead, that my husband is in prison for manslaughter. That makes me worse than a tramp, it makes me some kind of criminal. Okay, that's partly right. I *am* a criminal. I feel like one, anyway.

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"You see, there's one thing I could never figure out. I mean, there must be thousands of women like me, with husbands just like mine, who don't know what to do about them. Husbands who *do* things, you know what I mean? Dishonest things. And then come home and tell you about them, brag about them, count out the money they stole or conned right on the bedspread and tell you to look happy about it, *order* you to look happy! So what do women like me do, what are we supposed to do? Tell them what bad boys they are, walk out, get a divorce, call the police? Get real! Wives like me don't do a damn thing. They complain, they chew their nails and worry, then they go out and spend the money just as if it were legitimate, as if it were a regular paycheck. And their husband brings home some hot jewelry, do you think we don't wear it? If he tells you about some schnook he's taking for a ride, do you think we go warn the guy?

"Yes, I'm talking about your husband, Mrs. Watts, he was Joey's last sucker. The poor guy never had a chance when Joey got his dirty little hands on him, told him about all the millions they were going to make in the dress business, all the gorgeous showroom girls that would be all over him when his name was on the front office door. . . . Your husband must have needed someone to build him up, Mrs. Watts, he must have been real hurt and lonely, and Joey came along and made him feel like a million bucks. A million! That's how much he gave Joey for his half of the business. Only it never went into the business, it went into 'escrow,' Joey's favorite place for keeping money he's going to steal. Because that's what he was going to do, you understand? Joey's 'deal' was going to fall through at the last minute, and the poor guy's capital was going to go right down the tubes with it. Down the tubes, straight into my husband's pockets.

"Only something funny happened, Mrs. Watts. Your husband wasn't the dope Joey thought he was. He was smart enough to get an outside opinion about the deal, his own lawyer, his own CPA, and then Marty began to get suspicious. He started asking questions on the Street, he started talking to some of Joey's other 'business' partners, and the more he talked the smarter he got. Listen, I don't know what happened between you and Marty, but let me tell you, your husband was no dummy. I began to like the guy, even though I never met him.

"You heard right, Mrs. Watts. *I never met Marty.* You probably think I'm lying, but it's the truth. I never met the guy I was supposed

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to be having a hot affair with, we were never even introduced.

"You see, this is what really happened. I was home alone one night, watching TV, talk shows, game shows, movies and more movies, that was my life. Suddenly the phone rang. I didn't get excited. It was either my mother or somebody for Joey; I never stayed in one town long enough to make girlfriends. Only this time, it was Joey himself, calling me from Marty's apartment. That was peculiar, let me tell you. Joey never bothered calling me when he was out on 'business,' when he was doing the town with his latest patsy, not even to make excuses about not getting home before dawn. As if I cared. I liked the place better without Joey in it, I liked the bed all to myself—that's the kind of marriage it was now.

"So it was Joey on the phone, his voice kind of funny, like his collar was too tight, and he told me he wanted me to come to Marty's apartment, that it was important I get there right away. I didn't even know the address, he had to give it to me. He said I couldn't miss the building, it was this big high-rise they had just built on the West Side, with the high-rise rents that nobody was able to afford. I asked him what it was all about, but he hung up instead of answering, so I did what I was told. I had some crazy idea that maybe it was a party, that Joey had decided to make this meeting with Marty a social occasion.

"It sounded like a party when I got to the front door. I could hear music, people's voices, too many of them, and too loud. When Joey opened the door, I knew it was only the sound of a television show, from one of those big monster TVs, turned to top volume. The TV was the only light in the room. Joey was waiting for me in the dark, and even if I couldn't see his face, I knew he was scared. I asked him where his friend Marty was, and he said, 'In here,' and he took me to the bedroom. Yeah, that's where I got my first look at your husband, Mrs. Watts, in the bedroom. He was all dressed, but without a jacket or tie, and he was lying across the bed on his stomach, with his knees tucked under his chin. At first I was afraid he was drunk, and that Joey had called me over to help sober him up. Then I was wishing drunk was all he was, because when Joey turned on a bedside lamp, I saw the blood all over the sheets, spread out like a sunset. I started to be sick, but Joey wouldn't let me have the satisfaction. He grabbed my arm and said, 'Help me get his clothes off!'

"I thought he was crazy, but he wouldn't answer my questions, wouldn't tell me what happened. He was like a wild man, but *con-*

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trolled, you know what I mean? Like a machine that had to keep on doing what it was built to do. He yanked off Marty's shoes, these shiny Gucci loafers, and then started to unbutton his shirt. His hands were shaking, but he was careful, he didn't want to tear off any buttons. When he began yanking on the poor guy's pants, I went kind of hysterical, and he had to pay me some attention. 'Okay, okay,' he said. 'I'll strip him myself while you get your clothes off.' That's what he said to me, but if he thought it would calm me down he was even crazier than I thought. I had to get out of there, away from this nightmare, but Joey wouldn't let me go.

"That's when he told me the whole thing. About Marty, and the escrow account, and the dress business he was never going to buy, and the fact that Marty had figured out the whole scam and wasn't about to let Joey get away with it. Marty didn't just want his money back, he said, he wanted blood, he wanted to send Joey to the slammer for the next ten years. He was a crazy man, Joey said, so he did the only thing he could think of doing. He asked Marty for a meeting that night, and brought a small-caliber pistol with him just in case Marty didn't buy his arguments.

"I still don't know if Joey worked out his alibi before or after he shot your husband. If I know Joey, it was before. He just didn't want me to know how I figured in his scheme. He wanted me to be as surprised as I was when he called me at home and told me to come over, when he asked me to jump in bed with a dead man.

"I never hated my husband as much as I did that night. Yet I did what he told me to do. Don't ask me why. It was like I was chained to him, like I was being dragged wherever he went, no matter how deep or slimy a pit he crawled in. He stripped off your husband's clothes, telling me that nobody had heard the shot in that almost-empty building, that the TV had covered it, that there was no danger to either of us, that there could still be a pot of gold at this end of the rainbow. Then he took Marty's clothes and wrapped them in a newspaper. He went to the living room and turned off the TV, then out into the hallway to drop his bloody bundle into the incinerator. When he came back, he stared at me without saying a word. I started to undress. And Joey went to pick up the phone to call the police."

"But he didn't get off," the hard-eyed blonde said.

"No," Tammy said. "Joey never figured to get off completely, though he was hoping for a lighter sentence than the three years he got. His lawyer, Bromberg, told him that some judges don't like

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the 'unwritten law,' that they're not happy about people making other people dead, even when they kill adulterers in a jealous rage. But three years is better than twenty to life, and Joey figured he'd be out in eighteen months or less. Just today he said he'd be free by next June. I can't tell you how much I hate that idea."

"Even if the pot of gold is still in escrow?" The blond woman smiled thinly and reached for her purse.

"Oh my God, don't," Tammy wailed. "You've got to believe me! Every word I said is true. I wasn't your husband's girlfriend. I was *my* husband's patsy!"

"But Marty wasn't my husband," she said. "He was just someone I knew back home. I met him when I was working on a payroll robbery at his plant." She took a small cassette-recorder out of her purse, and checked the tape inside. "Of course, I don't have any jurisdiction in this state, but that doesn't mean I can't help out the local police. So would you mind if we just ran through that again, briefly?" She smiled. "And I promise—you won't have to worry about seeing that husband of yours too soon again."

Tammy was staring at the gun, its holster just barely visible. But Detective Joanne Wheeler, Scranton Police Department, was entitled to carry the weapon both on duty and off.

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

The 1992 anthology *Deadly Allies,* edited by Robert J. Randisi and Marilyn Wallace, was one of the best and most successful of recent years if awards attention is any gauge. The collaborative venture of Sisters in Crime and Private Eye Writers of America produced the winner of both the Edgar and Shamus awards in Benjamin Schutz's "Mary, Mary, Shut the Door" plus a second Edgar nominee by Max Allan Collins and Shamus nominees by Sue Grafton and Loren D. Estleman. Three of the four honored writers recur in its successor, *Deadly Allies II* (Doubleday, $18.95), edited by Randisi and Susan Dunlap, which maintains the standard of quality while carrying a bargain pricetag for 22 stories totaling over 450 pages.

Again some of the best private eyes in the business are on hand. Two of California's best and longest established female sleuths are in fine form: Maxine O'Callaghan's Delilah West breaking a perfect alibi in "Bad News" and Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone looking for a stalker in "The Lost Coast." Followers of the Claudia Bettencourt-Biff Archway subplot that has been running through the Nudger novels must not miss John Lutz's excellent "The Romantics," in which the private eye's personal life parallels the case at hand in Rumpole-of-the-Bailey fashion. Other highlights from established series include Michael Collins's Dan Fortune story "Angel Eyes," offering one of the most unusual mystery plots from a consistently inventive and surprising writer, and Benjamin Schutz's "What Goes Around," in which Leo Haggerty takes double revenge on another stalker and a professional colleague of dubious ethics. Others present in solid form include Lee Roberts's Saxon, Jeremiah Healy's John Francis Cuddy, Loren Estleman's Amos Walker, and editor Randisi's Nick Delvecchio.

Among the series characters who have not yet appeared at novel length, a pregnant Ms. Tree survives a hostage situation in Max Allan Collins's "Inconvenience Store" and Jan Grape's Jenny Gordon and C.J. Gunn seek a colorfully named stripper in "Scarlett Fever." Though their cutesy dialogue sometimes seems a little forced, Lydia Chin and Bill Smith of S.J. Rozan's sharply written and cunningly plotted "Film at Eleven" are a promising team I hope to meet again.

Among the out-of-series entries to tempt the awards voters are a pair of dark comic gems about the literary life, Joan Hess's charming and subtle epistolary tale "Paper Trial" and editor Dunlap's off-trail

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account of a group of writer friends who concoct the ultimate "Bad Review."

Three of the most prominent private eyes *not* to appear in *Deadly Allies* have new cases.

*** Max Allan Collins: *Carnal Hours,* Dutton, $20.95. In 1943, wealthy mining tycoon Sir Harry Oakes, an American who made his fortune in Canada, was bizarrely murdered in his home in the Bahamas. His son-in-law, Alfred de Marigny, was tried for the crime and acquitted. The murder remains officially unsolved and has been the subject of a wide array of elaborate theories. Nate Heller, the Chicago sleuth who seemingly was in on every major criminal investigation of the century, now takes on the Oakes case in a typically well-researched and effectively told combination of fact and fiction. Collins features more purely fictional characters than are customary in his historical reconstructions. Among the real people in the cast are Meyer Lansky and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. Three of the most commercially popular crime writers of the century—Erle Stanley Gardner, Ian Fleming, and Mickey Spillane—converge in this book, two as interestingly realized characters, the third as object of the author's homage in the climactic scene.

*** James Crumley: *The Mexican Tree Duck,* Mysterious, $19.95. Until this novel made him a series character, Meriwether, Montana's C.W. (Sonny) Sughrue, who first appeared in *The Last Good Kiss* (1978), ranked as one of the most celebrated one-book fictional sleuths, along with Sergeant Cuff of Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone,* Mark McPherson of Vera Caspary's *Laura,* and Nick and Nora Charles of Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man.* Sughrue is a wildman detective who goes at a case, here the search for the missing Mexican wife of a wealthy Texan, with self-destructive abandon. He and his friends never got over the defining event of their lives, combat in Vietnam, and they exist in a kind of drug-hazed time warp. Despite the sense of anachronism, there is no denying the beauty of Crumley's prose or his ability to bring offbeat colorful characters to life.

*** Arthur Lyons: *False Pretenses,* Mysterious, $18.95. Los Angeles sleuth Jacob Asch, who returns for the first time since *Other People's Money* in 1989, is a more traditional private eye, delivering the kind of punchy and picturesque first-person narrative associated with Raymond Chandler. When done as well as Lyons does it, it still seems fresh. Trying to save his reputation when a mendacious client is found murdered in his own office, Asch becomes romantically involved with Leslie Boetticher, the beautiful cop assigned to the case. The experienced reader will spend the last half of the book asking, is Lyons really going where I think he's going?

**** Barbara Vine: *Anna's Book,* Harmony, $22. In her sixth book

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under a pseudonym that was acknowledged from the beginning, Ruth Rendell again proves herself a master of intricate construction. The tale is told partly through the diaries of Anna Westerby, a Danish woman who recorded an account of her family life in England from 1905 to 1967, and partly through the present-day narrative of her granddaughter Ann Eastbrook, who has inherited literary rights to the diaries, now international bestsellers. Ann becomes intrigued with dual mysteries: the real identity of the aunt, Anna's daughter Swanny, who willed her the diaries, and the possible connection of the Westerby family to a notorious murder case of the day. The carefully laid clues in the diaries allow for as many alternate solutions as a vintage Ellery Queen novel, and Rendell's gradual unpeeling of the truth is dazzling. Some readers, though, may find the development of the story too leisurely.

This one is for the serious collector: *Lawrence Block Bibliography 1958–1993* (Airtight Seels Allied Production, $22) is a 500-copy limited edition, signed by Block, contributors Charles Ardai, Philip Friedman, and Wendy Hornsby, and cover artist Phil Parks. A handsome 104-page paperback, it includes several essays; the short story "One Thousand Dollars a Word," originally published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine,* March 1978; and listings of Block's books, under his own name or as Chip Harrison or Paul Kavanaugh, and short stories. The soft core sex novels Block wrote in the early sixties under unacknowledged pseudonyms have not been listed. Some copies of this valuable reference may still be available from Jim Seels, 23852 Via Navarra, Mission Viejo, CA 92691.

There's also a new professionally produced journal of news and reviews, *Murder & Mayhem: A Pocket Guide to Mystery Fiction* (P.O. Box 415024, Kansas City, MO 64141; eight issues for $14 in continental U.S., $28 outside), edited by Fiske and Elly-Ann Miles, Page size is 4″×9″, and the two issues examined ran 36 and 40 pages. Issue number 3 includes an article on the great critic Anthony Boucher and an interview with actress–private-eye-mystery writer Gillian Farrell, number 4 an especially informative interview with Stuart Kaminsky, an article on Virginia Rich, and that author's final, previously unpublished short story. Both issues feature intelligently hard-to-please book reviews.

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1993 READERS AWARD

Photo by Peter Papadopoulous

Heading your list for the second year in a row, writer and musician Doug Allyn made his way to the top with a nostalgic story of a rock'n roll road trip, "The Ghost Show" (December, 1993). The 1993 Readers Award will join many other plaques and award scrolls on the wall of the Michigan author's study, including those he received for his four Edgar Allan Poe Award nominations and the 1993 American Mystery Award.

Readers who have been following Mr. Allyn's work since his first story appeared in *EQMM* in 1987 will probably be able to make some guesses about his background, which includes a tour of southeast Asia in military intelligence during the Viet Nam War. Many of the author's stories, like last year's award winning "Candles in the Rain," involve veterans and the military. After completing his tour of duty, Mr. Allyn returned to school on the GI bill to study creative writing and criminal psychology, excellent preparations for crime writing. It was not until almost twenty years later, however, that he began to put his studies to use, for during his student days he began to moonlight as a guitarist and lyricist in the rock group Devil's Triangle, and music soon became his career.

Nowadays, Mr. Allyn spends mornings at the typewriter and afternoons in practice with his band, which continues to perform regularly in Michigan nightclubs. *EQMM* salutes a writer of unparalleled imagination as he receives this well-deserved award.

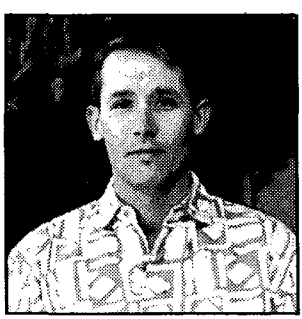

Photo by R. Solomon

Steven Saylor broke upon the mystery scene only three short years ago, but already he has made a name for himself, winning last year's Robert L. Fish Award and producing, to date, three critically acclaimed novels. The San Francisco writer held a variety of writing and editing jobs, mainly with local newspapers like the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, before a trip to Rome provided the spark that set him digging

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in the history books for the material for his successful historical mystery series featuring ancient Roman P.I. Gordianus the Finder.

With a degree in ancient history behind him at the University of Texas at Austin, it is not surprising that Mr. Saylor joined the growing ranks of those who are finding history ripe with possibilities for the crime story. What sets this author's historicals apart is his use of them to examine issues in our own society. It is not a coincidence, he thinks, that he began writing his first novel, *Roman Blood*, which deals with the difficulty of arriving at the truth amidst the corruption of the Roman Republic, during the Bush-Dukakis campaign in 1988. "Where could you find truth there?" Saylor says. "Truth was murdered in that election!"

Mr. Saylor placed second in the 1993 balloting for the Reader's Award with a fine entry in the Gordianus series, "The House of the Vestals" (April, 1993). He is a writer on the rising end of what is sure to be a brilliant career and we could not be more pleased to see him win this award.

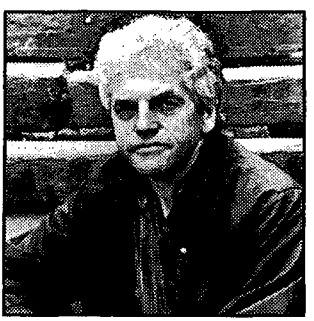

Photo by Valerie Cooper

Another former Reader's Award winner, and one of the most beloved writers in the genre, places third this year with the story "You May See a Strangler" (Mid-December, 1993). Like Steven Saylor, Peter Lovesey is at home when the territory is history. He is the author of two very successful series of mystery historicals, one featuring Queen Victoria's leisure-loving son Bertie and the other his popular Victorian detective, Sergeant Cribb. To date, Mr. Lovesey has reserved historical settings for his book-length work. His short stories, set in contemporary England, generally deal in an incisive and funny way with problems of modern life.

Mr. Lovesey lives in Wiltshire, England, where since 1977 he has been a full-time writer. His career as a writer was launched by an advertisement for a crime novel contest which appeared in the *London Times* while he was still teaching school in 1969. Inspired by his interest in Victorian foot races, he completed the novel in a few short weeks and won the prize.

Peter Lovesey has been tireless in his efforts on behalf of new writers in the mystery genre and has given generously of his time to organizations such as the Crime Writers Association of Great Britain. Thus it is with special pleasure that we announce this award from *EQMM*'s readers and wish him many more honors in years to come.

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a *NEW* Leopold story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

In this new Leopold adventure, the retired captain is called back to the police department on a homicide case because of his connections with city business organizations, and his friendships with the city's movers and shakers. Like his character Leopold, Ed Hoch has been active in the affairs of his own native city, Rochester, New York, where he has served on the library board for many years . . .

THE ESSEX PARK COWBOYS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

The call from Captain Fletcher caught Leopold by surprise on a cool September morning. He'd been retired from the city's Violent Crimes Squad for a year, and it had been months since Fletcher had last called. Leopold had busied himself with occasional investigative work for his wife Molly, who was back in criminal law, but this past week had been so quiet that he'd seriously considered starting work on writing his memoirs.

"How are you, Fletcher?" Leopold asked, grateful for anything to lift him out of the doldrums. "How's the crime rate?"

"The homicide rate just took a jump. Foster Stone was shot to death overnight."

"Foster Stone of the Wheelwright Corporation?"

"None other. I'm a bit out of my league on this one. I could use a bit of background from you."

"Background on Stone?"

"Background on the Essex Park Cowboys. His body was found in their clubrooms."

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Leopold took a deep breath. "I'll be down to your office within the hour."

He'd been captain of the city's Violent Crimes Squad for some thirty years before his retirement, but Leopold had never set foot inside the clubrooms of the Essex Park Cowboys. For better than a half-century it had been an exclusive gathering place for the city's elite, the business and financial leaders who determined its destiny. Editorial writers occasionally equated the Essex Park Cowboys with some sort of secret society, and it was true that the membership rolls were indeed secret.

They'd started as a turn-of-the-century street gang, these Essex Park Cowboys, evolving into a political club far removed from their roots in the old Essex Park neighborhood. Somewhere during the 1930s they'd evolved once again into what they were today. Some speculated that actual membership in the Cowboys was limited to twelve or fifteen top executives while others placed the number closer to twenty or thirty. All were men, of course, because in the days of its founding there'd been no female corporate executives. It went without saying that all were wealthy.

Rumor had it that the Essex Park Cowboys assembled twice each year for a formal stag dinner at the clubrooms, and met there more frequently to discuss matters of politics and civic planning. The clubrooms themselves occupied a private wing of the Shoreline Country Club, where windowless walls and locked doors ensured a privacy that did indeed remind one of a secret society.

The squad room was bustling when Leopold arrived. Sergeant Connie Trent was fighting off reporters and television crews anxious for a statement. "No," she announced in a loud voice. "There has been no arrest. The investigation is continuing."

"Any chance it was suicide?" one of the reporters called out.

"We're investigating every possibility. We'll know more about that after we have the medical examiner's report." She let Leopold slip into the squad room and then closed the door firmly. "It's been like this all morning," she told him.

"Fletcher phoned me."

She nodded. "He's in his office."

Leopold walked in and took the uncomfortable chair reserved for visitors. Fletcher had rearranged the office since his last visit, and it barely reminded him of the decades he'd spent there. "Is that a new desk, Captain?"

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Fletcher beamed. "It's refinished but it looks like new. We finally got the administration to spring for some painting and remodeling."

"Looks good."

"I've been wanting to call you all summer, but the time just got away from us. Worst summer for murder the city ever had. Domestic violence, drug killings—"

"I retired just in time."

Fletcher snorted. "If I know you, you'd love to be back here."

Leopold gave a shrug. "What about Foster Stone?"

"Did you know the man?"

"Met him a few times at civic functions. Didn't know him well. Of course Wheelwright is one of the city's top five employers, so his death is big news." He gestured toward the hallway where the press still waited.

"It's especially big news when he gets shot in the clubrooms of the damned Essex Park Cowboys! What do you know about them?"

"They were always good for a newspaper feature every five years or so, speculating on membership and their influence on the political scene. I gather Stone was a member?"

Fletcher nodded. "We think he was the current president, but no one will confirm it. I wish I'd paid more attention to these things over the years."

"Who found the body?"

"The clubrooms at the Shoreline are completely separate from the rest of the place, except that there's an entrance through the kitchen for when they have their stag dinners. Around ten o'clock last night one of the cooks was finishing up his shift in the kitchen when he thought he heard two shots from the Cowboys' wing. He reported it to the manager, who phoned their private extension and received no answer. Apparently he'd seen Foster Stone earlier and was pretty sure he was in there. When he saw that his car was still in the parking lot he used a special key to enter the clubrooms through the kitchen. Stone was dead in what appears to be the president's office."

"No one else was there?"

Fletcher shook his head. "But that's not surprising. About twenty minutes elapsed between hearing the shots and finding the body. The killer simply walked out the private entrance which leads directly to the parking lot."

"Then there's no chance of suicide?"

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"The weapon is missing. It was murder." He took out a pile of glossy photos. "I had Mickey snap everything in sight, as long as we were in there. Who knows when we'd have another chance?"

Leopold started at the top, with a photo of a wood-paneled game room. There was a pool table visible, along with a TV and two poker tables. The decor was Old West, with a buffalo head and a rack of rifles centered between some paintings or prints by Frederic Remington. "You check out these weapons?" he asked Fletcher.

"Of course. There are pistols too. They all have plugged barrels."

The next photo showed a dining room with a long table and eighteen chairs. "I guess that settled the speculation about how many members they have."

"This seems to serve as a conference room too," Fletcher said. "You can see there are pads and pencils by each place. There's a rest room too, and the only other room is this little president's office. Of course they can get food and drinks from the country club facilities, and use their health spa, golf course, tennis courts, and swimming pool."

"Very nice," Leopold admitted. He was studying the photo of the body on the floor of the office, halfway behind the desk. "Shot twice?"

Fletcher nodded. "Both wounds near the heart. Looks like a thirty-eight, but I don't have the autopsy report yet."

He flipped through the multiple views of the murder scene, coming to a sudden halt with one view of a wall of photographs. "What's this?"

"Judging by the look of some of them, I'd guess they're photographs of the past presidents of the Essex Park Cowboys. You'll note Stone's own photo is at the end as the current president."

"No dates or names, but most of them are familiar faces. This one just ahead of Stone is Mark Butler, the banker. I know he moved to Boston a couple of years ago."

"Twenty-seven pictures in all, but one photo is missing."

Leopold could see that. It was the ninth picture in the top row. The photos ran ten across and then started a new row. "The Cowboys began their present incarnation in the thirties—the late thirties, I think. Twenty-seven presidents implies two-year terms but that might vary when men like Butler leave town." He looked up at Fletcher. "What do you want me to do?"

"You know some of these people. You can talk to them. They're more—"

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"More my generation?" Leopold asked with a smile. Fletcher was over fifty himself.

"You know what I mean. They might talk more openly to you."

"Who are the possible suspects?"

"The key to the door connecting the country club kitchen to the Cowboys' clubrooms is kept in the manager's office. Kevin Clark. He's the one who entered the clubrooms and found the body. He's the only one with real access to that key. Of course the eighteen or so members of the Cowboys would all have keys to the parking lot door. And Stone may have invited his killer in."

Leopold nodded. "I'll speak with the manager first, before I tackle the Cowboys. Do you have their names yet?"

"We're working on it. Of course some are obvious. If Stone was a member certainly Washburn and Otis and Krapkie are Cowboys too."

They were three of the city's wealthiest businessmen. Leopold wondered what he was getting himself into. "This is all about pressure, isn't it?"

"Pressure?"

"If you ask too many questions they can pass the word to call you off. They can't call me off because I'm already retired."

Fletcher grinned. "I'm hoping it won't come to that. I just want to find Foster Stone's killer."

"I'll do what I can," Leopold promised.

Kevin Clark's office at the Shoreline Country Club seemed to brim with golf trophies, pads with golf pictures printed on the sides, even a golf-ball ashtray. Clark himself proved to be a youngish man in his mid-thirties with a pleasant smile and wavy red hair. He frowned slightly as he played with a pencil. "It's a terrible tragedy, for the Stone family and the entire city. I've already told Sergeant Trent everything I know about finding the body."

"You understand I'm retired from active police work, Mr. Clark. I'm only helping the investigation to the extent of gathering background material on the Essex Park Cowboys."

He shifted in his leather chair, perhaps a bit nervously, and ran a hand through his wavy hair. "If you've lived here any time at all, Mr. Leopold, you probably know more than I do already. The organization is somewhat secret, as you know. They lease that wing from Shoreline and hold occasional meetings and dinners there."

"How occasional?"

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"The dinners are usually in May and October. The meetings are about once a month except in the summer. Sometimes people are in there more frequently, playing cards or something. But I understand that just about all the members also hold membership in Shoreline, so they use the facilities here too."

"Who are the members?"

"I couldn't tell you. I've only been here a bit over a year, and in that time the only people I've ever dealt with have been Foster Stone and the attorney they employ. I knew Stone was the current president, of course. He always arranged for the dinners and light lunches at their meetings."

"What about the attorney?"

"Michael Simmons. He's come to see me a couple of times about the lawsuit."

"What lawsuit would that be?"

The young man gave a laugh. "Some woman is suing to get into the Cowboys. Claims they discriminate against females."

"It's a private social club, isn't it?"

"Sure is! But some courts have ruled lately that if it's a club that would advance her career, if it's a place where business deals could be made, then women should be allowed to join."

Leopold made a few notes. "You must have seen someone besides Stone entering the clubrooms on occasion."

"No one I could put a name to. The entrance is around the other side, and I'm new in the city. Didn't have much interest in it anyway, long as they abided by the lease and paid their rent on time."

"Who does the check come from?"

"The lawyer mails it."

"I guess I'd better go see him."

The Shoreline Country Club was located on Long Island Sound, at the very tip of the city limits. It took Leopold a half-hour to drive downtown through the afternoon traffic and park in the ramp garage next to the building housing the prestigious law firm of which Michael Simmons was a senior partner. The name was familiar to Leopold, but they'd never met. He'd called first, from Shoreline, but still found himself cooling his heels in the reception area for twenty minutes before Simmons's secretary appeared to usher him to the attorney's private office.

It was one of those rooms with lots of natural wood and hunting prints on the wall. Simmons himself, a square-jawed, handsome

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man in his mid-forties, gave the impression of taking time off from an important corporate merger to spend a few minutes with a doddering relative. "Now then, Mr. Leopold, what was it you called about?"

"The Essex Park Cowboys."

"Ah yes! I handle their legal work."

"Then you certainly know about the murder of Foster Stone last night."

"A terrible tragedy. Are you with the police?"

"Retired. I'm trying to gather some background on the Cowboys. I'd especially like a membership list."

The lawyer smiled sadly. "It's a very private club. There is no membership list."

"It stopped being private about the time someone pumped two bullets into the president's heart. One of the members had the best opportunity to enter that office and kill him."

"I'm sure the police will come up with a membership list if they need one," he replied, making it clear that Leopold didn't qualify. "Was there anything else? I'm having a busy day."

"One thing. I'd like to know about the woman who's suing the Cowboys."

"That action is completely without merit!"

"Do you want to give me her name? I can find it in the court records if you don't."

Simmons eyed him distastefully. "Her name is Maggie Archer. She's a successful marketing consultant and for some reason feels this qualifies her for membership in a private men's club."

Leopold rose to his feet. "Just one more question and I'll be on my way. Are you a member of the Cowboys, Mr. Simmons?"

"No, I'm not."

"Thank you for your time."

There was no reason to believe that the shooting of Foster Stone had any connection with the lawsuit brought by Maggie Archer, but Leopold viewed her as someone who might be more willing to tell what she knew about the Essex Park Cowboys. He phoned his wife Molly at her office. "Do you know Maggie Archer, the marketing consultant?"

"Slightly. I see her sometimes at the luncheons of the Professional Women's Club."

"She's filed a lawsuit against the Essex Park Cowboys because they won't let her join."

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"I heard about that. I don't think she has much chance of winning." Something must have clicked in her mind. "You're not getting involved in this Foster Stone killing, are you?"

"So you've heard about it."

"That's all anyone's talking about downtown. It's all over the afternoon paper."

"What do you hear?"

"The sort of wild rumors you'd expect. My favorite is that the Cowboys used their clubrooms for sex orgies and one of the women shot Stone."

"Believe me, there's not a bed in the place. I saw the photos at Fletcher's office."

"Then you are involved in this!"

"He just wants some background on the Cowboys. It gives me something to do."

"Be careful on it," she cautioned. "These are important people."

"Tell me a little about Maggie Archer."

"Very attractive, late thirties. All business, the times I've been in her company. Not married at present, though I think she's got an ex-husband somewhere. You'll like her."

Molly knew him well after seven years of marriage. She especially knew the sort of handsome, intelligent women who appealed to him. Maggie Archer was one of them. When he phoned late that afternoon and identified himself as Molly Calendar's husband, she immediately suggested a drink after work. "The day I've had, I couldn't stand this office one more minute. Could we meet at Spigato's? You know where it is?"

Spigato's was an Italian restaurant across from the city's convention center. Leopold had eaten there once or twice but it was more in the price range of marketing consultants than retired city detectives. He spotted her immediately, seated at a little table near the bar.

"Well," she said, offering him her hand. "I'm pleased to meet Molly's husband after all these years."

"She speaks highly of you," he said, pulling out the chair opposite and joining her in a glass of white wine.

"On the phone you mentioned the Cowboys."

He nodded. "I understand you have an action pending against them."

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"They won't consider me for membership because I'm a woman! It's like the Dark Ages. It's like that conservative Bohemian Club out in the California woods where the men run around naked."

"Oh, I don't—"

Her expression lightened into a smile. "Actually the Essex Park Cowboys is the last organization in the world I'd want to join under normal circumstances, but I felt I needed to make a statement. It's true that I could probably make more contacts and get more business if I was allowed into their inner sanctum."

"You know about the killing of Foster Stone at their clubrooms?"

"Of course! Who doesn't? The media haven't had such a big story in ages."

"He was their president."

"I know that."

"Do you know anything about his death?"

Maggie Archer stared at him. "Do you think I'm somehow involved? How do you suppose I could have gotten into the place?"

"You might have gone there to discuss the lawsuit with him."

"If I discussed it with anyone it would have been that lawyer Simmons. That's as close as I've gotten to any members of the Cowboys."

"Do you know who any of them are?"

"I know who all of them are! What good does that do me?"

"Could you get me a list of the members? It might be a big help."

She opened her purse and tossed a folded sheet of paper on the table between them. "Here, be my guest!"

It came so easily that Leopold could hardly believe it—the membership list for the city's most secret organization, being carried in her purse by this woman! "Why don't you give this to the newspaper?"

"I did, months ago. They told me there was nothing newsworthy about their mere membership. Of course James Matson, the paper's publisher, is one of the Cowboys."

There were no surprises on the list. Leopold had already guessed at the names of Otis, Washburn, and Krapkie, chief executive officers of the city's principal industries. Also present was the president of a new electronics firm that was making a big splash. Smaller companies were represented too, along with the founder of a chain of supermarkets that now blanketed the western part of the state.

"There are only seventeen," Leopold observed. "I thought they had eighteen members."

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"As I understood it there's no set number. They had eighteen until their former president, Mark Butler, took a job in Boston. His place has been vacant since then. That's when I began my campaign for the seat and met nothing but rebuffs. Their attorney, Michael Simmons, said I had no chance of being considered because it was a private club with an all-male membership."

"Where'd you get this list?"

She smiled again. "From a former member. I needed it as part of my lawsuit, to show that women were excluded from the Cowboys."

Leopold took a wild guess. "Mark Butler gave it to you, didn't he?"

"He may have," she admitted. "Let's just say he was sympathetic to my efforts."

"Do you have any idea who might have killed Stone?"

"None at all. I don't see how it could be connected to my lawsuit."

"There are pictures of all the past presidents in the room where he died." Leopold took out the print and showed it to her.

"It's about what I'd have expected," she said, barely glancing at it before she returned it. "Of course there are no blacks either. Just smug white males."

"One picture is missing. I was wondering about that."

"Probably got damaged and they sent it out to be fixed."

"Maybe."

When the waiter brought the check for their wine, she wanted to pay but Leopold finally won out.

There were remote crews from all four of the city's television channels camped out in front of police headquarters, hoping for a newsbreak as the time drew near for the six o'clock telecast. Leopold found Connie Trent up in the squad room, fielding phone calls. "This place is a madhouse," she told Leopold in a free moment. "Fletcher's got Foster Stone's widow with him now."

The door to his office opened as she spoke and Fletcher escorted a well-dressed graying woman out. "Thank you for coming, Mrs. Stone," he was saying, "I would have been happy to interview you at your home."

"I had funeral arrangements and legal matters to tend to. It was no problem."

Fletcher seemed pleased to see Leopold there. He introduced them and added, "Captain Leopold has come out of retirement to help us with the investigation."

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Mrs. Stone nodded, as if she'd expected nothing less. "I appreciate that."

Leopold went along with Fletcher's statement even though it stretched the truth. "Just a quick question, Mrs. Stone. Did your husband talk much about the Essex Park Cowboys? Was he on good terms with the other members?"

"I suppose he must have been on good terms if they elected him president. He talked very little about it, only mentioning when he had a meeting or a dinner. I knew some of the other members, of course. It was a boys' club sort of thing. It didn't bother me."

He felt awkward questioning her while they stood in the aisle of the squad room, but he knew it might be his only opportunity. "Did he have a meeting last night at the clubrooms?"

"No, he'd handwritten a rough draft of a statement regarding the purely social nature of the Cowboys, for use in the lawsuit brought by that Archer woman. He wanted to transfer it to the word processor at the clubrooms. That was the last I saw of him."

"I'm deeply sorry, Mrs. Stone. Your husband's death is a great loss to the community."

She went on her way and Leopold settled into the uncomfortable visitor's chair in Fletcher's office. "This day has been a nightmare," Fletcher told him. "There's so much media around we can't get anything done! Did you see all the remote trucks outside? You'd think we were launching a moon rocket." He looked at Leopold and grinned suddenly. "Want your job back?"

"No, thanks. You're doing fine."

"Some days I wonder." He rummaged in his desk drawer for a stick of chewing gum, a vice Leopold hadn't been aware of earlier. "How'd you make out?"

"Here's a list of the Cowboys' membership. Maggie Archer gave it to me."

Fletcher accepted it with thanks. "I asked that lawyer Simmons for one and he said he'd take it under advisement."

Leopold quickly ran over the highlights of his interviews. "Find anything on that missing picture yet?" he asked.

"Nothing. Cy Otis came forward right away to offer his help in the investigation. He expects the other members will be coming forward too. I'll give Connie this list and she can start checking on them, spur them along a bit."

"I'm beginning to think that if the picture has anything at all to do with the killing, it was taken because it was damaged somehow.

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It would have been behind where the killer was standing—correct?"

"More or less."

"Foster Stone might have hurled something that injured the killer. A few drops of blood might have splattered on the picture—"

"No trace of blood in that area," Fletcher said.

"It was just an idea."

"Got any others?"

Leopold nodded. "I think I'll fly up to Boston tomorrow and call on Mark Butler."

The last time he'd seen Mark Butler had been about a year earlier when the middle-aged computer genius returned to the city for the funeral of Catherine McNelis, a social matriarch who'd died at the age of ninety-one. They'd exchanged a few friendly words then and Leopold hoped the former president of the Essex Park Cowboys would be willing to go a bit further than he had with Maggie Archer.

Butler's presidential office at the Newbright Corporation was in a modern building a block from Copley Square, and from his windows one had a panoramic view of Trinity Church and the John Hancock Tower, the old and the new, like Mark Butler himself. He'd inherited the family business back home, an old-line company that built and repaired smokestacks. It was not the business for Mark Butler. He quickly sold it and used the proceeds to found a computer software company. Then, two years ago, it had been off to Boston to take command of Newbright, where a cadre of slick young MIT graduates were waiting to put their stamp on the computer chip business.

"You've come a long way from smokestacks," Leopold said as they shook hands in front of the window.

"And you've come a long way from home, Captain. What brings you to Boston?"

"I'm not Captain anymore. I retired about a year ago, shortly after I saw you at Catherine McNelis's funeral."

"That's a great loss to the department."

"Not so bad. Captain Fletcher is doing fine."

"I was surprised when you phoned about Foster Stone's murder. I assumed you were working on that."

"I am, in a way. Fletcher asked me to look into the Essex Park Cowboys."

"I was never too active—"

Leopold smiled. "You were their president before Stone."

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Mark Butler threw back his head and laughed. "You've done your research well. I hope I'm not a suspect."

"No, just a source of information about the Cowboys. They haven't yet replaced you with a new member, you know."

He nodded. "I've heard about the lawsuit." He was a handsome man, with thick dark hair not yet beginning to gray. Leopold suspected that Maggie Archer would have found him attractive.

"I knew very little about the Cowboys until these past few days. They were mentioned from time to time in the press and in conversations, but I never took them seriously. When plans for a new baseball stadium were discussed, or even a new shopping mall, the word always was that the Cowboys had approved the site. The inner circle, so to speak. Some said you met with the mayor at least once a month to use your influence in political matters."

"Sadly, all that was true once," Butler admitted. "These days the powerful have lost some of their power. The city's leading employers are laying off workers or even moving their corporate headquarters elsewhere. Politicians are swayed more by ethnic voting blocs than by industrial and financial leaders. It was just my luck to be one of the Cowboys' youngest presidents and watch its influence go into decline."

"Is that why you moved to Boston?"

He laughed again. "No, this just seemed to be the spot for me. I'd outgrown the city and maybe I'd outgrown the Cowboys."

"Do former presidents always leave the group?"

"Sometimes they do. Often they're older and about to retire. But we've had ones who've stayed on."

Leopold showed him the picture of the presidents' wall in the Cowboys' clubhouse. "There you are."

"Just ahead of Foster. That's how you knew I'd been president."

"Yes." Leopold pointed a finger. "There's a picture missing in the top row. Do you remember who should be there?"

Mark Butler frowned. "No idea. You're talking about forty years ago. I was around five at the time. I never knew these people, never even knew their names."

"But there used to be a picture hanging there?"

"Yes, of course. The whole top row was filled, and the second row. I'm in the third row, as you can see."

"Would the picture have had any value to anyone?"

"I can't imagine why. You shouldn't concern yourself with it, Leopold. That was a long time ago. Dredging up the past never serves any good in the present."

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It sounded like a veiled warning of some sort, yet this was the man who had helped Maggie Archer by giving her a membership list. Mark Butler was out of the Cowboys, willing to betray them to a certain extent, yet not completely. "Do you have any suspicion who killed Stone?"

"Not really. But it doesn't concern the missing picture. All those people were dead long ago."

Leopold nodded. As he was leaving he asked, "Will you be coming down for Foster Stone's funeral tomorrow?"

"Of course. I'll see you there."

Leopold picked up a little gift for Molly and caught the afternoon plane home.

"How was Boston?" she asked that evening after she returned from the office.

"It's a nice city but I didn't learn much. In fact, Mark Butler is coming down here tomorrow for Stone's funeral."

"Were they that friendly?"

"I've no idea, but they were fellow presidents of the Essex Park Cowboys."

As it turned out, the full membership of the Cowboys attended the funeral of Foster Stone at eleven the following morning. Michael Simmons, the lawyer, was there too, along with Kevin Clark, Shoreline's manager. James Matson, the newspaper publisher, personally escorted Mrs. Stone into church, closely followed by Mark Butler. Leopold saw at once that he'd have had no chance to converse with Butler, so maybe the Boston trip had been worthwhile after all.

After the service, it was Matson who approached him. "Good to see you again, Captain. The Violent Crimes Squad hasn't been the same since you retired."

"They're a good bunch. I've been meaning to thank you, though, for the nice editorial the paper ran when I left last year."

"It was well deserved." He glanced over his shoulder and saw that the mourners were returning to their cars for the ride to the cemetery. "I'd better catch up with the others."

Leopold nodded. Across the street in an unmarked car he saw Sergeant Connie Trent observing the funeral, and the mourners. She would report it all to Fletcher. It was standard procedure during a high-profile murder investigation. He got in his own car and followed the funeral procession out to Willowmont Cemetery. There were some two hundred mourners in all, a fitting number for the

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president of Wheelwright Industries. At the very edge of the crowd he thought he glimpsed Maggie Archer, but she was gone by the time he maneuvered around for a better look.

He spoke with a few people afterward and then returned to his car. There was a folded note on the front seat, slipped through the tiny opening he'd left in the driver's-side window. He unfolded it and read: *Leopold—Stay retired or your wife might have an accident.*

Later that day he showed the note to Fletcher. "I'm flattered that someone still thinks I'm that good," he said.

"I'll check it for prints."

"I'm sure you won't find any. If it was left by the killer he's too clever for that."

"Who else would have left it except the killer?"

"I suppose someone in the Cowboys."

Fletcher shook his head. "These people don't mean anything anymore. It's a new world and they're fighting yesterday's battles."

"They still hold a lot of power in this city. Maybe they're afraid an investigation would hurt them somehow."

"Anyway, you've done more than enough. I don't want you worrying about Molly. Why don't the two of you go down to New York for the weekend and see a few shows?"

Leopold was grim. "I'm not running away from this, Fletcher. I want the person who wrote this note."

Fletcher sighed. "Let me get Connie in here. She was watching the funeral from an unmarked car."

"I saw her."

Connie Trent came in and Leopold insisted she take his chair. She listened to what had happened and examined the note. "Sorry, I didn't see a thing. My eyes were on the grave site and the people around it. I didn't bother with the cars." She picked up the note in its plastic evidence bag. "Did you notice that the paper is square?"

"What about it?" Leopold asked.

"How often do you see square notepaper?" She turned to Fletcher. "Hand me that little magnifier you keep in your desk." After examining all four edges of the paper she passed it to Leopold. "There's printing on three edges. It came from one of those cubes of notepaper they sell with pictures on the sides. The fourth side has an adhesive binder."

Leopold examined it through the magnifier and said to Fletcher, "I think she's right. Now maybe I should call on all the Cowboys

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and see which one has one of these in his office." But something nagged at the back of his mind. Perhaps he'd already seen one of those square notepads somewhere recently.

"You'd better get home to Molly," Fletcher suggested.

He wanted to pick her up at the office, but that was impractical since they had two cars. Instead, he waited across the street from her parking garage and followed her to their house, pulling in just behind her. Molly got out of her car and saw him. "That's a coincidence! When did we ever arrive home at the same time?"

He smiled. "Since my retirement I'm usually home ahead of you."

Leopold helped her prepare dinner and she told him about a couple of routine cases she was handling. Later, after they'd finished, the phone rang and he answered. Surprisingly, it was Maggie Archer. "I hate to bother you at home like this," she said, "but I met with Michael Simmons about my lawsuit and he's offered me a settlement. I thought if I could stop by your place you and Molly might be able to give me some advice."

"Sure! Come ahead!"

He hung up and told Molly to prepare for giving some free legal advice. She made a face. "As long as it's nothing too major I shouldn't mind. Maggie's a nice person and I'm certainly on her side in the lawsuit against the Cowboys."

When she arrived Maggie Archer sat down with a cup of coffee and ran over her afternoon's experience. "I was at the cemetery. Don't ask me why—I just felt I should go. Simmons approached me afterward and suggested we talk at his office. I figured I had nothing to lose so I agreed to a three o'clock meeting. He went over his entire case for me, including a brief history of men's social clubs in England and America. He had statements from several of the Cowboys themselves, including a handwritten draft from Foster Stone, on the nature of the Cowboys and the limits of their activities. He even had a computer printout of their financial reports for the past five years, showing there'd been no political contributions whatsoever. There was a sworn statement from Kevin Clark, the country club manager, to the effect that he'd never heard any business being transacted on club premises."

Leopold nodded. "He was refuting your principal claim, that barring you from membership in the Cowboys kept you from making important business contacts and closing deals."

"Exactly! He laid it all out, to show me they were in a strong position to win their case, and then offered me a cash settlement to save us all the trouble of going to court."

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"How much of a settlement?" Molly asked.

"Fifty thousand dollars."

"You're thinking of taking it?"

"Not that little, no. My question is, in view of the case he's built up, would I be foolish to pursue my lawsuit? Should I make a counter-offer to settle?"

Molly thought about it and said finally, "Let me sleep on it. Can I call you in the morning?"

"Of course."

After she'd left, Leopold asked Molly, "What do you really think?"

"She had a weak case from the beginning, but I was all for her. I just wonder why she wants to quit now. Was it just the money all the time?"

"What will you tell her tomorrow?"

"Like I said, I'll sleep on it."

Leopold had a call of his own to make in the morning. He phoned Captain Fletcher at home and said, "I need to get into the Cowboys' clubrooms."

He heard a sigh on the other end. "You're off the case. I appreciate your help so far, but I don't need you any longer."

"Then you have the killer?"

"No," he admitted.

"You need me. Meet me at the Shoreline Country Club."

"Have you told Molly about that note?"

"No. The note makes no difference. I think I've got a lead and I want to follow up on it."

"All right," Fletcher agreed finally. "I'll be there in thirty minutes."

Leopold's first sight of the clubrooms offered no surprises. Everything was untouched since the photos had been taken. Billiard balls were still scattered on the pool table, as if from an interrupted game, and there was still a spot of blood on the floor of the president's office. The picture of the ninth president of the Essex Park Cowboys was still missing from the wall.

"You can see the wall is faded around it," Fletcher remarked. "It was there until quite recently, maybe even the night of the murder."

"You and Connie have talked to the members?"

"Sure. Most of them say they were never in the president's office. The others don't remember any specific picture."

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Leopold turned his attention to the computer on the desk. "You know how to work this thing?"

"A little," Fletcher replied. "We've got one like it in the office now."

"See if there's a directory of what's stored in it."

"That's easy enough." He turned it on and pressed two buttons. Immediately a long list appeared on the screen.

"Anything on history, past presidents?"

"No."

"Try this one: *Financial.*"

Fletcher pressed the proper buttons but the screen went blank. "Nothing there."

"Or else it's been erased. Why have the heading in the directory if it wasn't used?"

"Beats me." He went back to the directory listing.

Leopold squinted at the screen. "Try number eight: *Lawsuit.*"

The screen blazed with headings and subdivisions. In two minutes' time they established that all the documents pertaining to Maggie Archer's lawsuit had been filed here. "Anything else?" Fletcher asked.

"I think that does it."

"Do you have anything to tell me?"

"Soon," Leopold said.

He went around to the front of the country club and asked to see Kevin Clark. After a moment the smiling manager appeared. "Mr. Leopold! It's always a pleasure. Come into my office."

Leopold followed him in and took the same seat he'd occupied on his first visit. "I just had one question for you, Mr. Clark."

"What's that?"

"Did you really mean it when you threatened my wife?"

"What?" His face had gone white.

"Because if I thought you did, I just might break something."

"I don't know what you're talking about." He started to leave the chair but Leopold reached across the desk and grabbed a fistful of shirt. "The notepaper was square and it came from that cubical pad right there, with the pictures of the golfers printed on the edges of the paper. Under a magnifying glass you can see the printing on the edges."

"Well, they sell these in the pro shop."

"Stop kidding around, Kevin! You wanted me off the case before I discovered you killed Stone."

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"No! I never laid a finger on him!"

"Then why leave the note in my car?"

"I wanted you gone, that's all!" He was frightened now, squirming to get loose. "The Cowboys are an important revenue source for this club, the difference between profit and loss! It would mean my job if they had to move or close down."

"What were you planning to do to my wife?"

"Nothing, I swear!"

Leopold released his grip and stood up. "If I find out you're lying—"

"It's the truth! I was just worried about my job."

"Did you take the picture that's missing from Stone's office?"

"Picture?" He seemed truly puzzled.

"You've been in Stone's office. You found his body there. On the wall opposite his desk are pictures of the past presidents."

"I guess I never noticed. I was worried about you. I just kept being afraid you'd find out something about the Cowboys and close them down."

"Is there anything to find out?"

He just kept shaking his head, looking frightened. His bravest moment had been writing that note and slipping it through Leopold's car window. "What are you going to do to me?" he asked as Leopold went out the door.

"That's up to Captain Fletcher."

He had one more stop to make.

Michael Simmons was in his office, and this time he didn't keep Leopold waiting. "You said it was important."

"It is, Mr. Simmons. I understand you've worked out a possible settlement of her lawsuit with Miss Archer."

"I'm waiting to hear from her, but I'm most optimistic."

"Don't be. My wife and I are advising her against settlement at this time."

"What?"

"You heard correctly. She told me all the statements and briefs you have, all the witnesses you're prepared to call, but I don't think you'll go that far."

"Why not?"

"Because it would prove that you killed Foster Stone."

"You're crazy! I had no motive for killing Stone!"

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"We'll know about motive when we complete an audit of your finances."

"What in hell are you talking about, Leopold?"

"You handled the finances for the Essex Park Cowboys. You paid their rent on the clubrooms. I don't know what else was involved, but with that many wealthy businessmen I think it was more than just poker games. The financial records were erased from the computer in Stone's office. We know he went there the night he was killed to use the computer and enter his handwritten draft of a statement for your defense of Maggie Archer's lawsuit. While he was doing that, somehow he discovered something amiss in the financial records. He phoned you about it and you came right out there. Only you had a gun with you and you killed him."

"That's the wildest sort of speculation!"

"Then how did you get his handwritten statement about the Cowboys? Mrs. Stone said he had it with him when he left the house that night, and Maggie Archer says you have it now."

"Get out of here!" Simmons ordered. "You're retired from the police department. You have no legal standing!"

Leopold walked to the door. "No, but Captain Fletcher is waiting just outside."

Simmons went a bit wild then, and when Fletcher came running in it took him a moment to get handcuffs on the lawyer and read him his rights. Leopold stood to one side and waited for things to calm down. Then he said, "I know you took the picture too, and I think I know why."

"You don't know a thing!"

"After you shot Stone you had only minutes to get away. You were already fearful that the shots might have been heard in the Shoreline kitchen on the other side of the wall. You turned from the desk and saw it hanging there. Most of the members wouldn't have even thought of it, but there was a reason why that picture was very important to you. Familiar with police procedure, you knew the room would be photographed. You couldn't allow that wall to be seen by others."

"Do you have the picture?" Fletcher asked him.

Simmons had quieted down now, and the fight had drained from him. As they were about to lead him away he must have realized that the picture was the least of his problems. "Top drawer of the file cabinet," he told Leopold. "In the back. The key's in my desk."

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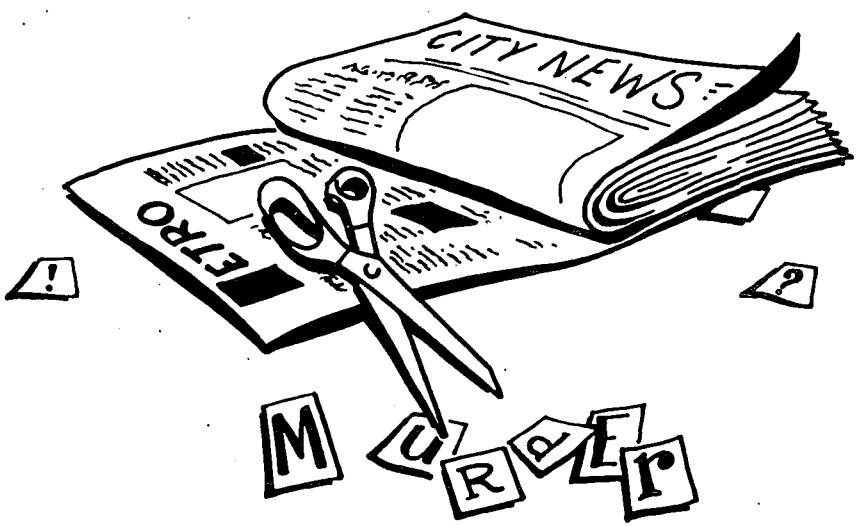
Leopold handled the forty-year-old photograph with all the care of a holy relic. What did it matter, some had asked, when it happened so long ago? But it had mattered to Michael Simmons, and it would matter to others as well. Though he'd suspected the truth in a general way, staring down at the face in the picture was still a shock. He should have guessed it, of course. Mark Butler had been at that funeral too, probably with the others. But exactly what had happened forty years ago would never be known now.

Even though the face was younger than the one Leopold had known, he recognized the eyes and the smile at once. It was the face of the city's late matriarch, Catherine McNelis. The ninth president of the Essex Park Cowboys had been a woman.



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A former mathematics instructor whose first story, a fantasy, was published in 1950, Arthur Porges has had the honor of knowing some of the great figures in our field, including Anthony Boucher, whom Mr. Porges credited with having taught him "the facts of life about plotting." Mr. Porges utilizes the skills of his long career here to create a wonderfully compressed piece of fiction . . .

THE ONLY SURVIVOR

by ARTHUR PORGES

The only survivor of the infamous Strelsau Plain Massacre, General Jaroslav Vasicek, who never before gave a clear, convincing explanation of his miraculous escape from a terrible battleground strewn with more than three thousand casualties, died last Wednesday at the age of ninety-two, a Hero of the Republic.

This is some of what he told the priest who gave him the Last Rites:

I'm sure you know, Father—who better than you, so long an apostle, in vain, of peace and goodwill among all men?—how deep ethnic and religious hatreds run in this part of Europe, and have done for countless bloody centuries.

There I was, after that disastrous debacle of a fight, so badly bungled by the General Staff, a newly made captain, several times decorated for valor, youngest in the whole corps, lying on the ground, helpless, my left thigh shattered by a shell-fragment, completely unable to move rapidly, if at all, to safer terrain.

Next to me, without so much as a scratch, was Plavinicic, that sorry specimen of a private. He was a very bad soldier, I have to tell you; timid, no cowardly, to be honest about it, wearing an ill-fitting, rather dirty uniform without the slightest grace or panache, with a grimy rifle he could never seem to aim right, even if he found the

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courage to fire it at anybody, which I doubt. He had no killer instinct whatever.

But we were trapped together, certainly doomed, with sheer cliffs at our backs and the merciless irregulars moving in from the other three sides to exterminate us. They always favored those wild tribesmen for such bloody work. No quarter was ever given in these savage battles; any survivors, wounded or not, who couldn't flee in time, were dispatched immediately when found, usually with a bullet in the head.

Now this Plavinicic, as I've said, was a nothing, a weedy youth, by profession a third-rate actor, as he cheerfully admitted, a fool.

He was totally useless in a fight, had no loyalty to the Fatherland, no self-respect or discipline. He didn't even despise our barbarian enemies. If you wonder how he ended up in the ranks, it's simple; we were desperate for infantrymen, having taken severe losses in previous battles, so we conscripted him, along with many others not much better, even though they all protested, whined, and even cried, as he did.

But worthless as he was, Plavinicic had somehow hit upon an amazingly cunning strategem, prompted by his bit part in a silly play, ironically titled, as you'll see, "The Captain's Trick." It involved the use of a simple prop, a flesh-colored plastic patch with a most realistic-looking bullet hole, all bloody, in the center. In the play, the besotted officer had attached it to one arm to feign a wound to impress the silly chit of a girl he coveted. A libel on the military!

Anyhow, after being ordered to report for duty, Plavinicic stole the little prop—yes, he was a thief, also—and took it with him to the army. He probably had some vague scheme of using it to fake a wound and get evacuated. What would have happened when the medics examined him—he'd be shot for sure!—probably didn't concern him much; one thing at a time, instant gratification, was his style. Most ingenious, I have to admit, but defeatist and cowardly in a soldier.

So there we were, without a prayer, and the irregulars quartering the area, pistols in hands, to give us all the *coup de grâce*. I had to watch, enviously, I concede, as Plavinicic, with his invariable little smirk, attached the patch to his forehead, smeared the possibly telltale edges with dirt, and assumed a convincing sprawl, obviously a soldier already finished off. And I, with my damned thigh, a real fighter with a fine future, much to offer the Fatherland, and very

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likely a general's stars before age fifty, flat on my back without a chance.

And now the part so hard to tell, but I have to, don't I Father, to get absolution. It has to be truth, however damning, or God looks the other way the nuns always told us.

But I remind you, Plavinicic was never a true comrade, a worthy fellow-in-arms, but a cowardly conscript, and not even of our faith, rather practically a heretic who often scoffed at things sacred. He was skinny and weak; my hands were strong and muscular, not as you see them now, all wasted and veiny after so many years.

Yes, God forgive me—I strangled him; he fought harder than I expected—and took the patch. I had to kill him, understand; craven that he was, Plavinicic would have betrayed me to the first enemy soldier who came by to finish us off. He was not the sort to die alone, even if I'd not taken his patch. He cared nothing about my future value to the army and his homeland.

That's pretty much it. At dusk I crept slowly, painfully away, and made it to our farthest outpost. I die a general, a Hero of the Republic, but I have not had many easy moments these last sixty-odd years.

Now, Father, I beg you, give me absolution . . .

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Mystery Writers of America, Inc.

In Celebration of Its 50th Anniversary Mystery Writers of America Announces the "Golden Mysteries" Short Story Contest

THE CONTEST is open to everyone everywhere (except for certain contest judges, the judges' immediate families, and employees of Dell Magazines and The Mysterious Press). There is no entry fee. Entries must be postmarked no sooner than March 1, 1994, no later than August 31, 1994. All submissions should be between 3500 and 7500 words in length. They should be typed, double-spaced, on one side of the paper and should include a cover sheet with the entrant's name, address, and telephone number, the story title, and its approximate length. The entrant's name should not appear on any page of the story, only on the cover sheet. No ghost stories or tales of the supernatural will be considered.

ENTRANTS WILL BE JUDGED in one of two categories: published writers or unpublished writers. For contest purposes, a published writer is one who has been paid money for any piece of fiction, whether or not it has been published. An unpublished writer is someone who has never received money for any piece of fiction. Only one story may be submitted by each entrant. It must be an original work, never published or accepted for publication. Entrants who wish their stories returned, or notification of contest results, should enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

PUBLISHED WRITERS should submit their stories to Edward D. Hoch, 2941 Lake Avenue, Rochester, NY 14612. Mr. Hoch's co-judges will be Sara Ann Freed, editor, The Mysterious Press, and Janet Hutchings, editor, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. UNPUBLISHED WRITERS should submit their stories to Clark Howard, P.O. Box 11507, Marina del Rey, CA 90295. Mr. Howard's co-judges will be Cathleen Jordan, editor, *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, and Walter Satterthwait, author.

CASH PRIZES to be awarded by Mystery Writers of America:

	PUBLISHED CATEGORY	UNPUBLISHED CATEGORY
1st Prize	$2000	$1500
2nd Prize	$1500	$1000
3rd Prize	$1000	$ 500

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine and *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* will have the option of publishing the top three stories in each category, with additional payment at their usual rates, and Mystery Writers of America will have the option of publishing any submitted story in a "Golden Mysteries" anthology, also with suitable payment. After the contest is over, and the above selections made, all entered stories may be resubmitted to the publication of your choice. Winners will be announced in January 1995.

The prizes indicated above may be increased by sponsor merchandise and/or additional cash.

MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA wishes all entrants good writing and good luck!

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ON OUR COVER

As promised during our anniversary celebrations, we feature on our cover this month the winner of *EQMM*'s fiftieth anniversary contest, an assortment of trivia questions for the *EQMM* buff that ran in the magazine from January through October 1991. Some of the questions were tough indeed, as the winner of the contest, Lois Collins of Salt Lake City, Utah will testify. Ms. Collins, a subscriber to *EQMM* for more than twenty years, spent many hours at the library digging for answers to the fifty questions we posed, but she was no stranger to research after serving for more than a decade as a reporter for Salt Lake City's *Deseret News,* and her diligence paid off.

Ms. Collins is a winner of both local and national journalism awards whose current "Human Services" beat for the *Deseret News* has her covering poverty, hunger, homelessness, mental illness, disabilities, troubled families, and youth problems. Even with such heartrending stories for her daily fare, she remains a cheerful and fun-loving person who last year toured the Caribbean islands with mystery writers Edward D. Hoch and John Lutz on *EQMM*'s Mystery Cruise.

One of several prizes offered the winner of the fiftieth anniversary contest was the option to appear on a cover of the magazine with a top author in the genre. Despite her busy schedule, bestselling author Mary Higgins Clark made it possible for us to keep that commitment by agreeing to her second *EQMM* photo session. Her first appearance for us, solo, was in October of 1989.

Mary Higgins Clark is one of those rare authors who achieve overnight success with the publication of a first novel. Prior to the publication of *Where Are the Children?* in 1975, the author had written short stories, radio scripts, and nonfiction with some success, but with nothing like the acclaim that followed that first suspense book. Eleven books later, she has achieved bestsellerdom not only in the United States but in France and other countries throughout the world. She is a recipient of the Grand Prix de Literature of France and has been awarded seven honorary doctorates.

Readers who have not had the pleasure of reading a Mary Higgins Clark novel will very likely be acquainted with her work through the seven movies, for television and screen, that have, to date, been made from her fiction. This month Simon & Schuster will publish her latest book, *Remember Me,* while Pocket Books simultaneously issues 1993's *I'll Be Seeing You* in paperback.

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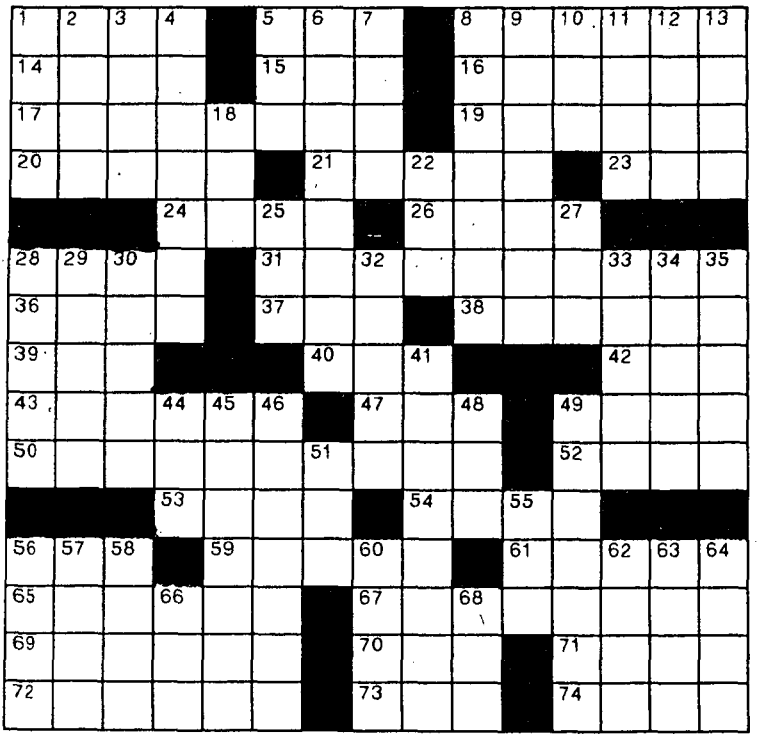
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

by Leigh Woznick



Solution on page 116

Final Resting Places

ACROSS

1 Where Inspector Wexford shopped for a body? (Rendell)
5 Pharm. category
8 Isolate
14 Greek region
15 Haggard heroine
16 Favored room for murder
17 Where a petty thief found more than the good silver? (Ross)
19 Tinker with
20 Near death (arch.)
21 Child's refrain

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23 —— standstill
24 Greek letters
26 Burden
28 Jazz form
31 Where one body had last call? (Grimes)
36 British boys
37 Soprano Sills, familiarly
38 Cigar
39 —— de cour (insincere friend)
40 Proofer's note
42 Residential suffix
43 One of the Gibbs
47 Sleep stage
49 Arena shape
50 Where to find a body on the lot? (Kaminsky)
52 Where a body gets bogged down in Boston (Barnes)
53 Color of blood
54 Arabic alphabet starter
56 Baba, of thieves
59 Waterway for a Chicago corpse? (Paretsky)
61 Triangular airplane wing
65 Creator of sleuth Jill Smith
67 Where these stiffs had to go (Fennelly or Press)
69 Provoke
70 Precedes pod or tropic
71 Business Admin. course
72 Ocean floor
73 Fairy potable
74 Where a corpse was dammed (van de Wetering)

DOWN

1 Isinglass
2 Double salt
3 Suction for reduction
4 Lip ornaments
5 Missionary monk grp.
6 Separated grain
7 Ghana greenback
8 Where the corpse had reservations (Rosenbaum)
9 For sure
10 Interpol tribunal? (abbr.)
11 Jaeger
12 For fear that
13 Lead poisoning treatment
18 See 48 down
22 Age
25 Police lookout
27 Great Lakes connectors
28 Morgue units
29 Token appearance
30 Fontainebleau farewell
32 —— barrel
33 Gothic arch
34 Giant
35 Legendary weak spots?
41 Courtroom jargon
44 Yearly economic fig.
45 Inform
46 Became a fugitive
48 With 18 down, Hall-of-Famer
49 Extended
51 Number of Christie's Indians
55 Alex Delaware's subjects of study
56 Homonym of helps
57 Sumptuous
58 Peruvian empire
60 During
62 Centers of activity
63 Nicked
64 —— Machin (Kunlun mountain)
66 Freedom, for short
68 Immediately

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a ***NEW*** short story by

DONALD OLSON

Although Donald Olson describes himself as a full-time writer, some of his freelance assignments take him into the area of teaching by correspondence. In 1993 he contributed to a Writer's Digest Guide on the writing of action scenes; in his own writing, Mr. Olson rarely relies on dramatic action, since he is eminently able to create suspense out of the ordinary incidents of daily life . . .

DOWN SOME DARK STREET

by DONALD OLSON

Although his past was not unblemished, Cleve Barmore had for twenty-three years led a blameless life. One of Gresham's leading citizens, he ran a thriving business, was a member of the Union National Bank board of directors, and sat on the city council and school board. He had a wife named Catherine and a son in college out West and had risen to so high an eminence he could regard the rebellious misdeeds of his youth with philosophical detachment, as if they'd been committed by a different person altogether, as in a morally comforting sense they had.

This being so, he reacted without major concern when he got an unexpected phone call at his office one week before he and Catherine were to celebrate their twentieth wedding anniversary.

"It's me, Harry Samson. Bet you thought I was dead and in my grave."

It took more than a voice on the phone to breach the defense system of Cleve's well-armored ego; only when he learned that Samson was right there in Gresham did his own voice betray a cautious note of alarm.

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"So why have you come back, Harry? You couldn't wait to get out of here, as I recall."

"As you *recall?* God, you make it sound like I had a choice."

"We both did."

"Then it seems I made the wrong one. Unlike you, Cleve. I've had my ear to the ground since I blew in. Except for the mayor, you seem to be the biggest honcho in town."

Cleve ignored the sarcasm. "Let's just say I've paid my dues, Harry."

"Good. Maybe you'll help me pay mine." Though he punctuated this with a chuckle, Cleve didn't like the sound of it.

"What is it you want, Harry?"

"To get together, for old time's sake. Don't worry, it's just a flying visit. When can we meet? I'm at the Brookwood Motel."

Cleve told him he had a council meeting at seven but could stop by on the way home.

"Bless you, buddy. I'm in Room Twelve."

The dinner was excellent, salmon casserole and one of Catherine's fabulous salads. She was a superb cook and indeed exemplified all the wifely virtues a man of Cleve's prominence could possibly desire. If no beauty, she had acquired over the years a style any woman might envy. That Cleve had never loved her yet had remained scrupulously faithful demonstrated but one of the many ways in which he had atoned to his own satisfaction for that one act of extreme lawlessness that could so easily have destroyed him.

"Buddy called," said Catherine. "He sends you his love."

"And what does he want me to send him? Another fifty bucks?"

"Now be nice. As a matter of fact he's sending *us* something. An anniversary present. Isn't it sweet of him to remember?"

Cleve had to agree that Buddy was as model a son as was Catherine a wife. If he had spoiled them both, it was out of an excess of guilt rather than from any abundance of love. He was glad Catherine had mentioned the anniversary, which as usual he'd forgotten. To remember the days of his courtship and marriage was to recall a period in his life he preferred to screen from his memory.

"Was it all worth it, darling?" Catherine startled him by saying, quite as if, with that eerie clairvoyance common to those who live closely together, she'd been reading his thoughts, which thank God she could not.

"What do you mean, worth it?"

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She waved a hand. "Everything. All this. Buddy and I. Our lives. Your work. All your civic laurels. I sometimes get the feeling none of it has made you entirely happy."

As if quickly adjusting a mask which had slipped out of place, Cleve assumed what he hoped was a reassuring look. "Are any of us *entirely* happy?"

"I am. When I think of what I was like when we first met, the state I was in, how I thought I could never know happiness again, and how ardently you *pursued* me, refusing to take no for an answer. What would my life have been like otherwise, I often wonder."

"I was there," he replied. "You needed me. That I've made you happy is the only important thing."

"To you, maybe. I wish I could have made *you* happier."

Such rare excursions beyond the normally humdrum plane of their conversations unsettled Cleve, deepened the worry lines on his pleasingly ascetic features. "Really, my dear," he said somewhat crossly, "I'm not the least bit unhappy."

"Good. Then we should both be satisfied. More dessert?"

Cleve had trouble keeping his mind on the council's proceedings, his thoughts distracted by uneasy speculation over the purpose of Harry Samson's visit. For years the man had been no more than a ghost, a disagreeable reminder of the night they'd shared the worst experience of Cleve's life. He had indeed imagined Harry dead, had certainly hoped he was dead, knowing at the same time that Harry could not harm him, not without harming himself.

It was dark by the time the meeting adjourned. As Cleve left his car and walked to the end of the Brookwood Motel a light rain dimpled the surface of the floodlit pool.

Harry Samson was holding a drink in his hand as he opened the door.

"Greetings, old buddy. Long time no see."

As they shook hands Cleve's first impression was of astonishment at Samson's appearance. His features had sagged and coarsened and it was as if they'd exchanged bodies. Harry had been the bigger man, well-muscled, while Cleve had been a beanpole by comparison. Now Samson seemed shrunken, a bag of bones, Cleve the hefty one.

Cleve accepted a drink. "You've changed, Harry."

"You noticed," said Samson wryly. "Lost a lung in February. Touch and go, they said, but here I am, God be praised. You're

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looking fit, Cleve. What happened to that skinny kid I used to shoot pool with?"

"Twenty some years and Lord knows how many tons of prime rib and gallons of martinis."

Samson waved him to a chair. "From what I found out—and don't worry, I was very discreet—you're quite the model citizen."

"My good deeds have finally caught up with me." Cleve looked at his watch. "I don't want to rush things, Harry, but my wife is expecting me home. She worries."

"Lucky you. Me, I got no one to worry about me. Oh, there've been good times, bright lights, but I'm washed up now, Cleve. Vegas can do that to a guy. The Wild West. Hell, I should have punched cattle instead of slot machines."

Samson's air of self-pity seemed to Cleve a part of the overall seediness a closer scrutiny revealed: the frayed shirt cuffs, stained, garish necktie, run-down shoes, none of which inspired sympathy in Cleve, only wonder how he could ever have admired such a man. But then Samson's dashingly youthful counterpart no longer existed, any more than did Cleve's.

"Are you saying you're in some sort of trouble, Harry?"

Samson laughed hollowly. "Nobody's *after* me, if that's what you mean. Except bill collectors."

"It's not been easy for me either, Harry."

Samson raked Cleve's expensive suit with a sardonic grin. "Oh, I can see."

"I don't mean money-wise. I'm talking about—" he didn't know quite how to put it without sounding mealy-mouthed or sanctimonious. "The consciousness of guilt. Remorse. Having to live with the memory of what we did."

"What *who* did, Cleve?"

"We were equally to blame, you know that, even if I was the one who pulled the trigger. Easy money, you said, knocking over a gas station. No one would be there, you said. But there was. The kid was there. I panicked. I'd never held a gun before. God knows I've tried to make up for what I did. For a while I honestly hoped I'd be caught. When I wasn't—well, let's say it taught me one hell of a lesson. I've tried to make amends, in ways you'd never be able to understand."

Samson poured himself another drink. "What I understand, old buddy, is that I'm at the bottom of the well without even a bucket. I decided to look you up. Hopped on a plane without even knowing

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if you were still alive or in any better shape than me. It appears I lucked out."

"In short, you want money."

Cleve had never wholly convinced himself that a reckoning would not one day be demanded, a fear based more on superstition than any religious conviction, but he'd always imagined it would take a more dramatic form, as swift and deadly as a mugger's attack when he was walking down some dark street.

"Why should I give you anything, Harry? I don't owe you. I'm a respected citizen. There's no proof I was ever involved in anything criminal, except that stolen car rap."

"For which your prints are still on record. We were amateurs, Cleve. We never even wore gloves when we hit that gas station. You would have left the gun where you dropped it if I hadn't gone back for it. At least I kept my wits about me, even to making sure I didn't leave my prints on the piece when I picked it up. I've still got that gun, Cleve."

Cleve tried to hide his alarm. "Then you're a damn fool."

With a smirk Samson stepped to the bureau, opened the top drawer, and took out something wrapped in a red bandanna, which he carefully unfolded to reveal the pistol. "Fifty grand, Cleve. You give me the cash and you get the gun. If not, if it goes to the cops with a note telling them to check out the prints, you'll be ruined. There's no statute of limitations on murder, you know."

Samson's hangdog air had vanished along with his pose of affability. Cleve saw the man now clearly for what he was, what he'd always been. "You'd be destroying yourself as well, Harry."

Samson shrugged. "Hell, I got nothing more to lose. And I'll be long gone by the time the cops check out the gun."

Cleve knew it would be futile to argue. "It'll take me a couple of days to get the money," he said.

"I can wait that long, but no longer, Cleve. I've got obligations out West. Suppose we meet here Thursday night. Might even have a farewell-forever drink."

Cleve stepped out of the shower, dried himself with rough, punishing strokes of the towel, then stood in front of the mirror studying the face that looked back at him, failing to discern in its mature lineaments any trace of that other, younger man who seemed to him now a total stranger. He could only believe that some wild, renegade

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gene had lodged in that younger body and by a rigorous self-exorcism been expelled.

Again he could only wonder what there'd been about Samson to inspire the hero-worship of that long-vanished youth; or was it true, as some psychologist had written, that violence holds a subtle attraction for the insecure? And he'd certainly been as insecure as any young man who'd been footloose and family-free since the age of sixteen.

"Darling, aren't you dressed yet?" called Catherine from the bedroom. "It would hardly do for us to be late on your big night."

Cleve opened the door. "Be ready in ten minutes."

It was the annual Man-of-the-Year Award banquet, at which Cleve was to be the recipient, an honor voted him by various civic and charitable organizations.

Catherine was fastening her earrings at the dressing table. Cleve said, "I don't deserve it, you know."

"Nonsense. Don't be so modest."

"I'm serious. It makes me feel like the most awful hypocrite."

Catherine turned and looked at him. "You can't really mean that."

"I do."

"My dear, I don't understand you at all. I sometimes think I never have."

The sad truth of this filled Cleve with a bitter sorrow as a vision crossed his mind of his rising to accept the award and astounding the roomful of admirers by discarding his prepared speech and confessing himself to be a murderer. Alas, he knew it was much too late now to act upon such reckless impulses.

He carried the money in a briefcase when he arrived at the motel soon after midnight. Only a few cars were in the parking lot; rain had evaporated into a heavy mist, reducing visibility to a few yards.

Samson, holding a glass, greeted Cleve with a peevish expression. "I was just about to phone your house." Then his eyes brightened as he glanced at the briefcase. "You brought it then."

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

"What choice did you have?"

"Then let's not dally. Here. Count it."

Samson opened the case. "It looks right. I trust you."

"It's late. The gun, please."

Samson drained his glass, refilled it from the bottle on the bedside table. Cleve realized the man was half-drunk.

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"Cleve, I trusted you to bring the money. You've got to trust me, too. Like, see, I made these arrangements—"

"Quit stalling, Harry. Just give me the damn gun." Cleve made a move toward the bureau; Samson stepped in front of him, put a hand on his arm.

"Cleve, listen to me. Do you think I'm stupid? I couldn't carry a gun on board the plane."

"Cut the bull, Harry. I saw it. Now hand it over. We made a deal."

Samson turned and opened the drawer, took out the gun. "I'm not trying to con you, Cleve. But this here ain't the gun. Not *the* gun. I bought this one the day I hit town. It's clean. I wanted you to think it was the gun—"

"Give it here, damn you."

Samson backed away. "I'm leveling with you, Cleve. The other night when we made our deal I placed a call to a pal of mine in Vegas. He was expecting it—if everything panned out at this end. He knew what to do. It's all taken care of. I'm not bulling you, man."

Sick with fury and self-disgust at his own stupidity, at being so easily bluffed into believing Samson could be trusted when all the time the man's only intention had been to rip him off, Cleve ignored the gun pointed at his chest, oblivious of whether it might or might not be loaded, seized the neck of the whiskey bottle close by his hand, and swung it wildly at Samson's head.

The gun fell to the floor as Samson collapsed and lay motionless. For a countless number of heartbeats Cleve didn't move, then finally he knelt and touched his fingertips to Samson's neck. He couldn't believe he'd struck with enough force to kill. But there was no doubt about it: the man was dead.

Cleve had no idea how much time had passed before he could stir himself to open the door and peer out. No sound broke through the heavy mist. Calmly now, he decided what he must do. With his handkerchief he wiped the doorknob and anything in the room he might have touched. He picked up the whiskey bottle and the gun and put them in the briefcase with the money. He then made a methodical search of the bureau before going through Samson's pockets, finding nothing to link him to the dead man but a slip of paper in Samson's wallet bearing Cleve's address and phone number.

Discounting the risk as minimal, he dragged the dead man to his feet, looped an arm around the sagging shoulders, and, as if supporting a helpless drunk, eased him through the door. Pausing

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to make sure the area was deserted, he moved across the short stretch of grass to the pool, grateful that at this hour the floodlights had been turned off.

With scarcely any effort at all he slid the body into the deep end of the pool, then went back for the briefcase and walked briskly to his car.

He stopped in the middle of the Veteran's Memorial Bridge spanning the river, opened the window, and tossed the gun and bottle over the parapet.

For the second time in his life he had killed a man, but this time he felt no prick of remorse. It was clearly a case of self-defense.

Shortly after noon three days later, Cleve's secretary put through a call from his wife.

"Cleve, I've been trying to get you for hours."

"I've been out at the Skyview Project."

"I think you'd better come home right away."

Her tone alarmed him. "What is it? Is anything wrong? It isn't Buddy?"

"Buddy? No, of course not. Something very peculiar. I still can't quite believe it. Can you leave the office right away?"

"If it's urgent, yes."

"Please hurry."

When Cleve got to the house a strange car was parked in the drive. Inside the house he found Catherine, looking pale and excited, talking to a young man in a business suit.

She rushed to Cleve. "Darling, the most extraordinary thing. I couldn't wait any longer so I called the police. This is Detective Rasmussen. A package came in the mail today and right away I thought it was from Buddy, the gift he was sending. I didn't even notice the postmark."

The detective stepped forward, tilting the small box he was holding to show Cleve what it contained.

"There was a note with it," Rasmussen said. "Whoever sent it claims it's the gun that killed Norman Weaver twenty-three years ago and that we'll have the killer's prints on file."

Catherine seized Cleve's hand. "Oh darling, it's either some ghastly cruel joke or some kind of—miracle."

It seemed to Cleve that her voice was coming from a vast distance. He put his hand on the back of a chair as if to steady himself, though what he felt was not a physical dizziness.

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"What baffles me," said Catherine, "well, the whole thing is spooky, but whoever sent it must have known about us, darling."

The detective clearly found all this as mystifying as did Catherine. "You said you two were married three years after your first husband was killed in that gas-station robbery?"

Catherine beamed a smile at Cleve. "After Norman died I thought I'd never dream of marrying again. But Cleve never gave up. At first I thought it was only because he felt sorry for me and Buddy. Cleve adopted Buddy as soon as we were married."

The detective carefully rewrapped the package. "Well, we'll run a check on the gun and see what we come up with. We'll be in touch."

Catherine said, "Wouldn't it be strange if it does check out and it turns out the killer is still right here in Gresham?"

The detective shook his head. "More likely he skipped town or has been dead for years."

Remembering that stranger, that wild disturbed young man who now bore nothing in common with him but a name, Cleve almost spoke the words aloud: You're right, he has been dead for years.

But who would believe him? Least of all Catherine.

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

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a ***NEW*** short story by

DAVID WILLIAMS

Oxford educated Welshman David Williams is the author of seventeen crime novels featuring investment banker Mark Treasure. This year, with the publication of Last Seen Breathing, *he launches a new series featuring Detective Chief Inspector Merlin Parry of the South Wales Police. Fortunately for* EQMM, *novel writing has not prevented the author from turning out his gently satirical stories. He describes this latest one as "close to a morality tale . . ."*

SECOND BEST MAN

by DAVID WILLIAMS

I suppose I resented Harry Smith from the very start, deep down and without admitting it to myself. It's why I was ready to kill him in the end. Before that, there was always reason to keep the special friendship going—or what everyone saw as a special friendship, and that included me, the best part of the time.

At school Harry was deeply unpopular. Short, fat, and pale, he was supposed to be anaemic, wore thick glasses, and was excused from all games. None of that stopped him from being bullied. Well it wouldn't, not in our part of South London—not in a run-down comprehensive school where a bunch of dedicated yobos only stopped making life a misery for the weaker boys while they did even nastier things to the girls. Except I protected Harry. It was for a price, not money, but he always had more of that than I had, and it came in useful.

It was brains Harry had, brains and cunning—enough to get us both through the term tests, and the exams at the end. Harry turned

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exam cheating into an art, not that he needed to cheat on his own account. He just worked out all the answers fast, and found original ways of passing them to me. It was thanks to Harry I got five GCE passes, and thanks to me Harry never got his nose broken, or worse. It was a fair exchange.

I was always a well-built lad, and handy with my fists. It made up for not being so brainy. My dad had been a professional boxer. He taught me the rudiments of the manly art early on—before he left my mum to join a circus act. That was the last we ever saw of my dad: I was twelve at the time.

When I got older, I developed what they call rugged good looks. It was Harry who said I ought to have been called Byron not Bryan, after Lord Byron, the poet who'd had all the birds begging for it: we were doing *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan* for English class at the time. Harry started calling me Byron after that, and it stuck. Even my mum called me Byron. I didn't mind: I was quite pleased really. I was pulling more than a fair share of birds myself by then, young Debby Moxton for one.

I left school before Harry. He went on to London University too: well he would, of course. Me, I went from job to job. I tried to get into acting. My mum used to say I had everything it took for that, except there wasn't the money for drama school and you don't get far without. It was those GCE certificates that saved me from ending up in labouring, I suppose. They got me the interviews, and—no point being modest about it—my winning personality and looks got me the jobs. Only none of the jobs lasted: I don't know why really. Mostly I was in selling—a rep for dog food, lavatory cleaners, encyclopaedias, this and that. Of course, I deserved better, a lot better.

It was Harry Smith, the bountiful, who gave me my first good job.

Harry's old dad had always been in building supplies, in a small way. It surprised everybody when Harry joined him—took over the business really: that was after getting a degree in economics. Only there was method in Harry's madness. There was a big building boom on, with everyone short of materials. Harry specialized. He just bought and sold partitioning, all kinds of partitioning—wood, chipboard, hardboard, plastic, metal, you name it, for every kind of building—houses, offices, schools, factories. He bought big, too, going all over the world in the end to get what he wanted. At the start he cashed in on his dad's goodwill, and his credit rating—and his dedication. That was clever. People had always trusted his dad, and the old man worked for Harry like a stoat. After two or three years,

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Harry had all the banks queuing up to lend him money—first in thousands, then hundreds of thousands, then millions. Marvellous how that lot'll back you when you're successful: not a sodding one would lend me enough to see me through acting school.

I didn't know about Harry's success at the start: we'd lost touch for quite a while. That was partly because I'd given up living at home for a bit—until I found things too expensive and moved back. Harry and I met up again at a dance for old pupils in the school hall one Christmas. When I saw him, I wondered what the hell he was doing there: he'd hated the school and he didn't dance. Physically he hadn't altered that much, he was still small, fat, and ugly, only the clothes he was wearing were smarter than anyone else's, and he seemed to breathe confidence. Debby Moxton was there too, with another girl we'd known called Beryl.

Debby had definitely been the best looker in the school in our day, and probably any other day, come to that. Three years younger than Harry and me, at twenty-two, which she was at this point, she was an absolute knockout—a tall, natural blonde, with an English rose complexion and a smashing figure. I reckoned she'd still have been gone on me if I'd made anything of myself. We'd knocked around together for a while after I left school. Unlike the other girls though, she'd never given it away, if you see what I mean? Bit of petting and a kiss goodnight was all you ever got from Debby. She made it pretty plain she was saving the real favours for a husband, and whoever married her had better prove in advance he could keep her in the manner intended. Till then she was happy enough working as a director's secretary in some big Croydon company.

So the four of us ended up spending that evening together. It seemed almost that Harry had intended we'd do that from the start, though how he knew we were all going to be there I never found out.

It was while the girls were in the ladies' room that I told Harry about my career progress, or lack of it.

"You ought to come into my business, Byron, boy," he said, straight off. "Plenty of room. We're expanding all the time."

"No, I couldn't do that. Couldn't take advantage," I said, hoping he'd insist, and wishing I'd got onto him before this.

"Yes, you could," he answered, on cue. "Anyway, I owe you."

In a way he was right. If I hadn't protected him at school he could easily have turned out an insecure adult with a persecution complex, prevented from reaching his true potential. I read somewhere about

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that happening to people who'd been bullied a lot.

"So what would I do?" I remember asking next, but in a positive way, not to encourage Harry to have second thoughts. "I don't know too much about partitioning." Except I knew even less about portable air-conditioning units, which, as I'd told Harry, was what I was supposed to be flogging at the time.

"Anyone who can sell air conditioning can sell partitioning," he said. "It's all part of the building trade. *And* you've got the presence for selling, Byron. Always have had. And the looks." He'd always envied my appearance.

I didn't bother admitting I hadn't actually sold any of the air-conditioning units yet—and that I hadn't exactly reached star salesman status with the dog food, the lavatory cleaners, or the encyclopedias either. Anyway, I think Harry had really guessed all that, and he wasn't asking for references in any case. So it was agreed I should start with Smith Partitions Limited two weeks from the following Monday. Harry told the girls when they came back from the ladies': it all happened as fast as that. The girls were impressed too. Well, with Harry they were—especially Debby.

At the end of the dance, Harry drove us all home in the new Jaguar he'd got parked outside in the schoolyard. Caused quite a sensation that car did, and it was meant to. This was Harry showing off in front of his old mates and enemies—mostly enemies—and you couldn't blame him either. He dropped Beryl and me at her place, which was just round the corner from my mother's, then drove on with Debby, who was looking gorgeous, and regal with it, in the front passenger seat.

Debby and Harry were married three months later. I was pretty sore about that. I didn't show it, of course. There was no point, especially since Harry had kind of asked for my approval in advance. He said he knew I'd have Debby's best interests at heart since he remembered we'd been close some years back, and did I think she'd make a good wife for a rising industrialist who could afford to give her everything she'd wanted out of life? So what could I say, except wish him good luck? It happened to be the day after he'd promoted me by making me responsible for selling to the solid "house accounts"—building firms who'd never have dreamed of buying partitioning from anyone else but Harry. All I had to do was make courtesy calls, buy the customers lunch sometimes, and collect the bloody orders. To have told him what I really felt about his marrying Debby would only have upset the apple cart and risked my job,

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probably with nothing achieved. I mean she wasn't going to marry me, was she?

So short-arsed, four-eyed, anaemic Harry Smith landed South London's most desirable dollybird—and he got a virgin into the bargain.

I was best man at the wedding. Beryl was chief bridesmaid. When it came to appearances, Beryl was never exactly a show stopper, not in the same class as Debby, not by a thousand miles. She looked pretty good that day though, which was when I took up with her seriously. We got hitched ourselves not long after. I figured she'd stay close to Debby, so it was a way for me to keep the business relations cemented, if you follow me?—not very high-minded of me perhaps, but practical.

At first we saw a lot of Harry and Debby socially. When Harry moved the business out beyond Reading, in Berkshire, he bought a home there too, and we did the same—not on a golf course like his, and it wasn't a mansion like his either. Harry set up a factory as well as a warehouse in the new location because by then he was into more than just buying and selling partitions. He'd decided he was going to manufacture the stuff himself, and not just partitions either. In no time the company was making complete, integrated portable buildings for temporary and permanent use, and undercutting everybody else in sight. It was a gold mine.

All this moved Harry into the really big time. Of course, before long the people close to him had to be in the same league as he was, and for one reason and another that didn't include me. I'd already been shifted off "house accounts" into office management. It seemed you had to be a qualified architect with an MBA to handle the big accounts at that stage, even the tame ones. I was paid a bit more, but it was a downward move since I had less real responsibility. If I saw Harry at all at work it was only in the corridor. I noticed he was looking worn, and I swear sometimes he didn't seem to remember me: anyway, he was hardly ever in the office, or in the country for that matter, especially after we won a Duke of Edinburgh Award for Export. There was no holding him then. People said he had his sights on a knighthood, and every time a newspaper ran a list of the country's highest earners, Harry would be there in the top hundred.

I'd lost touch with Debby and Harry socially by that time too, though that was mostly because Beryl and I had got divorced. We hadn't been compatible from the start. I was only worried that if Debby sided with Beryl over our breakup, it might lead to me losing

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my job, but it didn't. I came to the conclusion that Debby and Harry had probably moved so far above our level, neither of them knew about the divorce, or if they did, neither could have cared less. At least, that's what I thought until that Friday night in November four years ago when I had to take something from the factory to their house.

Don't misunderstand, I hadn't been reduced to delivering parcels for the company on a regular basis—not quite, anyway. A silver tea set, a wedding present Harry had ordered for someone, had been sent to the office by mistake. Harry had been abroad, and his chauffeur was already at Heathrow meeting him. His secretary was in a flap because the wedding was next day and the Smiths were supposed to be taking the present with them. It was already gone six and the secretary was late for a date with her boyfriend. She knew my house wasn't far from Harry's, so she rushed into my office almost in tears to ask could I possibly?

Debby answered the door herself. I hadn't seen her for nearly three years, not to speak to anyway. At thirty-four she still looked smashing, figure a bit fuller, which you'd expect after she'd had two kids, both boys incidentally, and both, I gathered later, already away at boarding school. Only I wondered why she was wearing the dark glasses.

She seemed glad to see me, kissed me warmly on the cheek, and invited me in. She wasn't much interested in the story of the silver tea set and dropped the box it was in on one of the hall chairs.

I'd been to the house before, often, but not for a long time. They'd made some improvements. For a start, there were a lot more expensive-looking antiques and pictures about the place.

She linked her arm in mine. "What'll you drink? Whisky still, is it? Water but no ice?" she asked, steering me into their drawing room.

I said, "I don't think I'd better stay that long. Harry'll be home any minute, won't he?"

"Harry won't be home till Monday, and only then if he remembers where he lives. I just got a fax from the Paris office. He has to stay over. Pressure of work, poor dear. Tough titty having to spend the weekend in Paris by yourself, I don't think," she went on in a really acid tone as she poured my drink from a trolley across the room.

"What about the wedding tomorrow?"

"Screw the wedding. If he's not here to take me, I'm not going. They're his friends, not mine. Business friends. We don't have any

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of the other sort, not anymore." She came over with my drink.

"Aren't you having one?" I asked.

"Of course I am. It's over here. I'm a . . . I'm slightly ahead of you. I'm sorry about your divorce." So she did know about that. "I meant to ring you. Haven't talked to Beryl either. She always had personality problems, of course. You two should never have got married in the first place. Applies to a lot of us. Let's sit here." So I needn't have worried about the divorce costing me my job. She motioned me to the sofa in front of the blazing log fire in the huge open hearth. The fire was a gas jet and the logs were imitation, but it was all pretty cozy.

"Something wrong with your eyes, Debby?" I said when we were sitting quite close together.

"Yes. One of them got blacked by my adoring husband on Wednesday." She took off the glasses. Her right eye was almost closed and the flesh around it puffed and bruised.

"Accident?"

"Yes. He was aiming for my ribs, but he was drunk, and missed. Made up for it though with the next punch. Want to see?" Without waiting for an answer, she put her glass down, sat up straight, and in one showy movement pulled the cashmere sweater she was wearing over her head. "How about that? I thought he'd broken a rib. Feel the lump." She'd hollowed her back and leaned closer to me. Then she took my hand and ran it gently over the blue-black area above her midriff.

It was a massive bruise all right, but I was paying more attention to the rest of what she'd exposed. All she'd been wearing under the sweater was one of those lacy half-bras. It was white, making a nice contrast against her smooth, tanned skin, and didn't leave much to the imagination. Her breasts looked as firm and perfect as they had when she was a girl, well, they did to me at least.

"Worn well otherwise, haven't I, Byron," she said quietly, following my eyes as well as my thoughts. Then, without shifting her gaze from mine, she undid the bra and shook it off to prove the point further before putting her arms around my neck. "Why don't you stay for dinner? It's all prepared. Pity to waste it. No hurry, of course, it'll keep." Then she kissed me, on the lips this time, slowly and sensuously while she began undoing the buttons on my shirt.

"Are you alone in the house?" I asked.

"No, silly, you're here. Handsome, adorable, sexy Byron," she giggled, thrusting her arm down under my shirt, fingers exploring.

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"I meant . . ."

"I know what you meant. But even the fabulous Smiths don't have living-in servants. So you can stay the whole night if you want. But let's not wait till then," she added.

And we didn't. After all, I'd been waiting over twenty years for Debby.

It was when we were upstairs in bed much later that she began pouring her heart out to me, lying close in my arms. By that time we'd eaten, and the stimulating effect of what she'd drunk had worn off—and I guessed she'd drunk quite a bit before I'd got to the house. Now she wasn't kittenish anymore, a bit maudlin really, but very affectionate still.

She gave me more depressing details of her life with Harry, about the way he beat her up, his drinking, his frequent absences, his infidelities, his lack of interest in the children, and his always putting her down in public, something that hurt her as much as the physical cruelty, only in a different way.

"So why don't you leave him?" I asked.

"And leave all this *too*?"

She had a point there. She'd certainly come a long way from Mafeking Street, Lambeth. Even so, breaking with Harry didn't mean she had to go back to that kind of lifestyle.

"In a divorce you'd get half his estate, probably," I explained. "He's stinking rich."

"I wouldn't get half. Or anything like. You know what a clever sod he is. I'm scared he'd fix it so I'd hardly have enough to live on. *And* he'd get custody of the boys. I couldn't bear that."

"But you're wrong there. The wife always . . ."

"Not this wife," she interrupted. "If we divorced, I'd be the guilty party. He's . . . he's got grounds. I know he's unfaithful to me, but the difference is, I can't prove it."

"So what sort of grounds does he have?" It was a funny question to be asking when we were lying beside each other in her matrimonial, king-sized bed.

She didn't say anything for a bit, just fingered the sheet, then she looked up and shrugged. "What the hell, I can tell you. My darling, oldest friend." She kissed me behind the ear before going on. "Four years ago, I had a brief affair. Well, Harry was neglecting me. He'd insisted on both the boys going away to school. I felt unwanted, unnecessary, and so lonely. I . . . I needed someone."

"I wish you'd needed me," I said.

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"You were still married," she answered, with what I suppose was a good enough reason. Beryl had once been her best friend, after all. "Anyway, the man I was involved with was a young assistant pro, here at the golf club. Harry got suspicious and had us both followed. That's how he got the evidence. Nothing's come out in public, but Harry made me sign a confession. And I had to promise never to see Rickie again. That was his name. Rickie. He was so beautiful," she added dreamily, then completed quickly: "Like you, Byron." She squeezed my arm, but I remember thinking she'd been a bit late. "Harry still arranged to have Rickie fired. And fixed it so he'd never get another job in golf. Not anywhere. God, he's a mean bastard."

"I still don't think one affair should stop you getting a good divorce settlement, or custody of the boys," I offered, although I wasn't exactly speaking from experience. Beryl and I never had any kids.

"Except there's something else. Something . . . something that turns off divorce judges more than casual affairs." She sighed and clung closer to me, the fingers of one hand playing with the hairs on my chest. Her head was on my shoulder, but her eyes were now avoiding mine. "You haven't seen me for so long, of course," she went on. "Three years ago I was a mess. After I'd had to break up with Rickie, I . . . I started taking drugs."

"Hard drugs or soft drugs?"

"Both. Well, one sort led to the other. That usually happens, doesn't it?" I didn't answer. I've never been into drugs. "I . . . I was a fool, I know," she added, "but what with the beatings and the loneliness . . ."

"You don't have to talk about it," I said quietly.

"But I want to. To you. There's no one else I can unburden on. The drug bit's over now. I took the cure. In a clinic. In California. Harry told everyone I had a blood disease, but you can bet he's got the sodding details in writing somewhere. That's why I'm scared I wouldn't get custody." She breathed out noisily. "I hate Harry. And I hate my life. I often think of doing myself in. I'm so unhappy, and it's all so unfair." She started to cry quietly.

It was my turn to sigh—because I was aggravated. "But there's got to be some way out for you?"

She leaned right across me. I thought she was getting amorous again, until her hand reached out to unlock the drawer of the small table on my side of the bed. When she moved back she was holding a handgun. It was a smallish, heavy black revolver with a short barrel.

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"Suicide's not the way," I said quickly, taking the gun from her with care. "You're still beautiful, with plenty to live for." I meant what I said, too, and was already vaguely trying to fit myself into an ongoing scenario.

"I've never thought of using the gun on myself." She paused. "Sometimes I think of using it on Harry, though."

That shook me, because I could tell from her tone she was serious. "Murder Harry?" I said. "But that wouldn't solve your problems for you."

"It'd solve them if a burglar did it," she answered coolly. "Harry had a pair of guns brought over from the States because we've had three break-ins this year. He swears he'll shoot the next thief if he gets the chance. The other gun's at the London flat. We've been burgled there too."

"Isn't there an alarm system here?"

"Yes, but the thieves always get round it. They're so sophisticated these days. If Harry went after the next one, if there was a fight, and if it was Harry who got shot, I could be a witness to what happened, that it was he who had the gun, not the burglar. We could do it, Byron," she whispered at the end, breathing the words quickly, close to my ear.

"It wouldn't be as simple as that," I said.

"It would, you know," she answered. "And then I'd be very rich, and we could get married later, and live happily ever after. Isn't that what you always wanted, darling Byron?"

There were any number of times later when I could have backed down, but I didn't. Like she said, it really was very simple—and the reward was so big.

It was one in the morning on the Thursday, three weeks later, when I left the car in a copse, close to the house. I remember being glad it was cloudy and dark, with the ground bone dry. Wearing gloves and a balaclava, I went in through the unlocked kitchen door. The gun was in one of the drawers, where Debby had put it that afternoon. I went softly up the stairs to their bedroom. There was no alarm: she had switched it off earlier, after they had gone to bed, pretending she'd forgotten to do something downstairs.

When I got to the bedroom door I began taking long breaths to steady my nerves, going over the final part of the plan.

When I opened the door, Debby was to switch on the lights over the bed. I was to go straight to Harry and shoot him in the head

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while he was still searching for the gun in the drawer. Then I'd leave straightaway, dropping the gun on the landing and breaking the panel of glass next to the lock on the kitchen door as I left, but from the outside. Debby would wait fifteen minutes, the time it would take me to drive home on back roads. Then, feigning hysterics, she was to call the police. Meantime she'd have turned the alarm system on again, forced open the jewelry drawers of her dressing table, and arranged things to look as if there'd been a fight on the bed between Harry, who'd gone for his gun, and the burglar who'd woken him. There was less than no chance anyone would hear the shot and fix the time of it. The house was set in the center of ten acres of garden and paddock. The bedroom windows would be shut; in any case they overlooked a golf fairway, and miles of common land beyond that.

That first comment of Debby's had been pretty accurate. There was really nothing to it if we kept our heads. And the more I thought of pulling the trigger on Harry, the more acceptable the idea had become.

Getting practical experience of the gun had helped a bit. Debby had brought it to the house one morning when he was away, and I'd taken it to practice with in the local wood where people were always shooting rabbits. I'd cleaned it afterwards, and refilled the chambers with the extra shells she'd brought. She'd collected it again later that day.

It was while I was firing the gun that I got to thinking Harry was right about what he used to say he'd owed me—except the menial job I'd had in his company over the last years didn't show lasting gratitude, or anything like it, not when you realised he'd become a multimillionaire. As for what he'd done to Debby, well that put the lid on it. But I have to admit that what egged me on the most was that I'd be ending up with Debby after all—and with Harry's fortune to go with her. There was sweet justice in that.

I was pretty calm when I finally opened the bedroom door. I wasn't three paces into the room before the lights went on as arranged. I kept going, the gun already held out in front of me in my right hand, left hand supporting the right wrist. My gaze was fixed on Harry, but in the corner of my eye I saw Debby slip out of the bed onto the floor out of the way: good girl.

By now a bleary Harry should have been fumbling with the drawer key—but he wasn't. He was sitting up in bed putting on his

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glasses and grinning. Grinning! He could see the gun. Did he have a death wish or something?

When I was two paces from Harry I stopped, straightened my arms, and levelled the barrel at his forehead. At that range I couldn't miss—but for a split second looking into his eyes made me hesitate. I might not have gone through with it, except Debby saw what was happening to me.

"Do it! Do it!" she screamed.

I pulled the trigger, my ears instinctively preparing for the explosion. There was a click but no bang.

I pulled the trigger again, and the same thing happened. I pulled the safety catch on, then off again, and pulled the trigger again, and again, and again—and all I could hear was the sound of Harry's mounting laughter. I was panicky and confused. I looked down at the gun. It had to be jammed.

It was then I decided to club Harry to death. I looked up and was about to spring at him when there was an explosion and a flash. Harry was holding a smoking gun in his hand. He'd been holding it under the bedclothes. The shot he'd just fired could have killed me, no question.

"Keep still, Byron," he said, eyeing me. "And Debby, my love, come round and stand next to Byron where I can see you. And do it now or I'll shoot him in a tender place, and that'd be inconvenient for both of you." He chuckled as she did as she was told.

"I'm afraid you've got the gun with no firing pin, Byron," he went on. "I use it just to frighten people. It doesn't frighten me, of course. I switched guns after Debby lent you the other one to practice with. Taking it to your house was a mistake, of course. Just made it easier for the people I had following her. You'd have been better meeting in a supermarket or on a park bench, even. Don't you watch crime movies? Oh, and Byron, please take that ridiculous sock off your head. Slowly though, no tricks."

I took off the balaclava.

"That's much better," Harry said. "Now we can see your famously handsome face again. I knew it was you, of course, Byron. I have a perfect recording of you both putting the plot together that night I was delayed in Paris. Only, as I remember, it was Debby who did all the plotting. Never really an original thinker, were you, Byron? Not a thinker at all, come to that. You always relied on others for the brainwork, didn't you? Still do, of course."

"How did you find out?" I asked.

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"That you were planning to murder me? In cold blood?" Without taking his eyes off me, he tapped the bedside table drawer with his hand. "Undoing this lock starts a miniature tape recorder at the back of the drawer. Simple but ingenious, don't you think? I never told Debby about it for . . . for various reasons. It's recording now, as a matter of fact. I like to have a complete record of things. By the way, the tape I referred to just now is lodged under seal with my solicitor—to be played in the event I should die in suspicious circumstances."

That was enough for me. "Harry," I said, "shoot me, or hand me over to the police. Either way, get on with it."

Harry looked shocked. "Shoot you? Shoot Byron, my old buddy? My childhood companion and protector. My best man? How could you think I'd do anything so barbarous? It'd be like beating up my wife. Giving her a black eye. Punching her in the ribs." Suddenly his voice rose as his gaze turned on Debby. "Tell him you lied about that, you little slut, you druggy, you bloody whore. Tell him how you got those injuries. Tell him now," he shouted angrily.

Debby had been silent up to then. Then she sank onto the end of the bed and started weeping. "I'm sorry, Harry, I didn't mean . . ."

"Tell him now," he repeated with a roar.

She swallowed, wiping her eyes with her hand. "It . . . it was an accident. I fell down the stairs."

"You fell down the stairs when you were stoned out of your mind. One night when you had your teenage lovers here. Two of them. That's the truth, isn't it?" he roared again.

"Yes, Harry," she answered with a whimper.

Harry nodded and looked back at me. "Curious that after being a professional virgin up to our marriage, she's been making up for lost time ever since. Though not with me, I'm afraid." He pulled a face. "Now then, as for turning you over to the police, Byron, I don't think that'd do a lot of good, do you?" he asked, as if it was a perfectly normal question to which he needed an unbiased answer.

"What are you going to do then?" I asked.

"I'm going to let you go home now," he answered, in the same serious tone as before. "But you'll be taking my wife with you. She's leaving me, Byron. Leaving me forever. Eloping with you, you might say. In fact, that's exactly what we will say. All of us. It's been bothering me for a long time how to get Debby out of my life. To turn her over to someone who'd care for her. Her and her problems, with drink and drugs and men. Big problems they are, too. Have

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been for me and my sons for a long time. We're all fed up with her, I'm afraid."

"That's not true," Debby screamed.

"Oh, but it *is* true, my love," he answered quietly. "You know, Byron, my sons begged me to send them away to school because they couldn't stand living with their mother anymore, especially when I'm away. Did you ever hear of such a thing? I try to be here as much as possible, especially in the school holidays, as much as the business allows at least. That's often difficult, but I'm making arrangements for it not to be in the future. And contrary to what you've been told, I don't have girlfriends, oh, and I don't drink either. Well, you know I never did." He waited for Debby to protest, but she didn't. "No, it'll be much better if Debby goes with you. Then I can divorce her. I would have done it earlier, but the men she's been associating with wouldn't have stayed with her for ten minutes, not unless I'd paid them. And if she'd had money of her own, they'd have robbed her blind. And I care about her, and her future, you see? That's why I'm ready to trust her to you. Trust you to stay with her. To look after her. Especially since you have no alternative. Either of you. And I'll make it worth your while."

"I wouldn't need paying to . . . " I began, rashly probably.

"No, but money will come in handy," Harry interrupted. "It's a big responsibility you're assuming, Byron. But in a sense you're right. This could be a case of true love where mine has failed. After all, you've been lovers since childhood." He smiled gravely. "I've often thought if Debby had ever really cared for me, and if I'd been able to spend more time with her, I might have been able to straighten her out. But she never did love me, you know? She was just after the good life. It's you she's always loved, Byron."

"You can't do this to me, Harry," Debby blurted out at last, sounding desperate. "I did love you. I love you still. I'm not going with him."

"Oh, but you are, my sweet," he replied. "You've had your chances before, but they've all ended in broken promises to me, haven't they? If, as you said on the tape, if you were ready to marry Byron after he'd murdered me, surely you're ready to do it now? Surely you're relieved he hasn't had to shoot me after all? Don't all our years together mean you're glad my life's been spared at least?"

There was silence for a bit, except Debby started weeping again.

"If the two of you refuse to do as I say, then I'm afraid I'll have to turn the matter over to the police. Tapes and all," said Harry sol-

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emnly. "It'll mean a long prison term for both of you, of course. Some would say that's no more than you deserve. Anyway, it's up to you." He was looking at me hard as he spoke.

"Assuming we leave tonight, what's the deal, Harry?" I asked. "The whole deal?"

"That's more like it," he said. He got out of bed and pulled on a dressing gown. He still had the gun in his hand, but we both knew he didn't need it anymore, that he'd won: the tape at his lawyers saw to that, and he knew me well enough to accept that I wouldn't make some dangerous, and bloody pointless, heroic gesture. "You always were a practical chap, Byron. Where your own best interests were involved," he said, moving to the chair in front of Debby's dressing table, turning it round, and sitting in it where he could contemplate us both, his chin buried in his neck like a Buddha. "The deal is that you leave together now. Debby can pack a case for immediate needs, the rest of her stuff can be sent on. She'll leave me a note saying you've gone away together. That she never wants to see me or our children again. That'll be grounds enough for an uncontested divorce with no nonsense about huge compensation for an unfaithful, unworthy wife and mother."

Debby drew in her breath sharply, but didn't utter otherwise.

"I shan't be able to go back to the company," I said.

"I agree, that would be difficult for all concerned," he answered with a half smile.

"So what are we going to live on? We'll starve," cried Debby, and meaning it.

"You'll live well enough. In Perth."

"Perth, Scotland?" I asked warily.

"Perth, Western Australia," he answered, as I was afraid he was going to. "There's been a vacancy on the general management staff of our distribution company there for some time. You're appointed, Byron, with a ten-year contract. The salary's better than you're getting here. Great country, Australia. You'll leave before Christmas, all travelling expenses found. There'll be a generous annual bonus too, from me to you, Byron, so long as you two stay together. You can't do better than that now, can you? Not in the circumstances. So take it or leave it, both of you."

He had to be right, of course. In the circumstances. Even Debby agreed in the end. She didn't relish the prospect of prison any more than I did.

Harry always was right, of course. Clever Harry. We've made a good life here, too. When we got married, Harry sent us out that silver tea set as a present.●

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a *NEW* short story by

BRENDAN DuBOIS

At about the same time this issue reaches the newsstands, Brendan DuBois's first novel will be shipped to bookstores. Set in New Hampshire, like most of the author's stories for us, the book, entitled Dead Sand *(Otto Penzler Books), introduces an amateur series sleuth. In the following short fiction, New Hampshire is the setting again, this time for a sinister holiday homecoming . . .*

THE NECESSARY BROTHER

by BRENDAN DuBOIS

I still have the problem of last evening's phone call on my mind as I wait for Sarah to finish her shower this Thursday holiday morning in November. From my vantage point on the bed I see that the city's weather is overcast, and I wonder if snow flurries will start as I begin the long drive that waits for me later in the morning. The bedroom is large and is in the corner of the building, with a balcony that overlooks Central Park. I pause between the satin sheets and wait, my hands folded behind my head, as the shower stops and Sarah ambles out. She smiles at me and I smile back, feeling effortless in doing that, for we have no secrets from each other, no worries or frets about what the future may bring. That was settled months ago, in our agreement when we first met, and our arrangement works for both of us.

She comes over, toweling her long blond hair with a thick white towel, smile still on her face, a black silk dressing gown barely covering her model's body. As she clambers on the bed and straddles me, she drops the towel and leans forward, enveloping me in her damp hair, nuzzling my neck.

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"I don't see why you have to leave, Carl," she says, in her breathless voice that can still make my head turn. "And I can't believe you're driving. That must be at least four hours away. Why don't you fly?"

"It's more like five," I say, idly caressing her slim hips. "And I'm driving because flying is torture this time of year, and I want to travel alone."

She gently bites me on the neck and then sits back, her pale blue eyes laughing at me. With her long red fingernails she idly traces the scars along my side and chest, and then touches the faint ones on my arms where I had the tattoos removed years ago. When we first met and first made love, Sarah was fascinated by the marks on my body, and it's a fascination that has grown over the months. At night, during our loveplay, she will sometimes stop and touch a scar and demand a story, and sometimes I surprise her by telling her the truth.

"And why are you going?" she asks. "We could have a lot of fun here today, you and me. Order up a wonderful meal. Watch the parades and old movies. Maybe even catch one of the football games."

I reach up and stroke her chin. "I'm going because I have to. And because it's family."

She makes a face and gets out of bed, drawing the gown closer to her. "Hah. Family. Must be some family to make you drive all that way. But I don't understand you, not at all. You hardly ever talk about them, Carl. Not ever. What's the rush? What's the reason?"

I shrug. "Because they're family. No other reason."

Sarah tosses the towel at my head and says in a joking tone, "You're impossible, and I'm not sure why I put up with you."

"Me too," I say, and I get up and go into the steamy bathroom as she begins to dive into the walk-in closet that belongs to her.

I stay in the shower for what seems hours, luxuriating in the hot and steamy water, remembering the times growing up in Boston Falls when showers were rationed to five minutes apiece because of the creaky hot water that could only stand so much use every cold day. Father had to take his shower before going to the mills, and Brad was next because he was the oldest. I was fortunate, being in the middle, for our youngest brother, Owen, sometimes ended up with lukewarm water, if that. And Mother, well, we never knew when she bathed. It was a family secret.

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I get out and towel myself down, enjoying the feel of the warm heat on my lean body as I enter the bedroom. Another difference. Getting out of the shower used to mean walking across cold linoleum, grit on your feet as you got dressed for school. Now it means walking into a warm and carpeted bedroom, my clothes laid out neatly on my bed. I dress quickly, knowing I will have to move fast to avoid the traffic for the day's parade. I go out to the kitchen overlooking the large and dark sunken living room, and Sarah is gone, having left breakfast for me on the marbletop counter. The day's *Times* is there, folded, and I stand and eat the scrambled eggs, toast, and bacon, while drinking a large glass of orange juice and a cup of coffee.

When I unfold the *Times* a note falls out. It's in Sarah's handwriting. *Do have a nice trip,* it says. *I've called down to Raphael. See you when you get back. Yours, S.*

Yours. Sarah has never signed a note or a letter to me that says love. Always it's "yours." That's because Sarah tells the truth.

I wash the dishes and go into the large walk-in closet near the door that leads out to the hallway. I select a couple of heavy winter jackets, and from a combination-lock box similar to a fuse box, take out a Bianchi shoulder holster, a 9mm Beretta, and two spare magazines. I slide on the holster and pull a wool cardigan on and leave and take the elevator down, whistling as I do so.

Out on the sidewalk by the lobby Raphael nods to me as I step out into the brisk air, his doorkeeper's uniform clean and sharp. My black Mercedes is already pulled up, engine purring, faint tendrils of exhaust eddying up into the thick, cold air. Raphael smiles and touches his cap with a brief salute. There is an old knife scar on his brown cheek, and though still a teenager, he has seen some things that could give me the trembling wake-ups at two A.M. In addition to his compensation from the building, I pay Raphael an extra hundred a week to keep his eyes open for me. The doorkeepers in this city open and close lots of doors, and they also open and close a lot of secrets, and that's a wonderful resource for my business.

Raphael walks with me and opens the door. "A cold morning, Mr. Curtis. Are you ready for your drive?"

I slip a folded ten-dollar bill into his white-gloved hand, and it disappears effortlessly. "Absolutely. Trunk packed?"

"That it is," he says as I toss the two winter coats onto the passenger's seat and buckle up in the warm interior. I always wear seatbelts, a rule that, among others, I follow religiously. As he closes

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the door, Raphael smiles again and says, *"Vaya con Dios,"* and since the door is shut, I don't reply. But I do smile in return and he goes back to his post.

I'm about fifteen minutes into my drive when I notice the thermos bottle on the front seat, partially covered by the two coats I dumped there. At a long stoplight I unscrew the cap and smell the fresh coffee, then take a quick drink and decide Raphael probably deserves a larger Christmas bonus this year.

As I drive I listen to my collection of classical music CDs. I can't tell you the difference between an opus and a symphony, a quartet or a movement, or who came first, Bach or Beethoven. But I do know what I like, and classical music is something that just seems to settle into my soul, like hot honey traveling into a honeycomb. I have no stomach for, nor interest in, what passes as modern music. When I drive I start at one end of my CD collection and in a month or so I get to the other end, and then start again.

The scenery as I go through the busy streets and across the numbered highways on my way to Connecticut is an urban sprawl of dead factories, junkyards, tenements, vacated lots, and battered cars with bald tires. Not a single pedestrian I see looks up. They all stare at the ground, as if embarrassed at what is around them, as if made shy by what has become of their country. I'm not embarrassed. I'm somewhat amused. It's the hard lives in that mess that give me my life's work.

I drive on, humming along to something on the CD that features a lot of French horns.

Through Connecticut I drive in a half-daze, listening to the music, thinking over the phone call of the previous night and the unique problem that it poses for me. I knew within seconds of hanging up the telephone what my response would be, but it still troubles me. Some things are hard to confront, especially when they're personal. But I have no choice. I know what I must do and that gives me some comfort, but not enough. Not nearly enough.

While driving along the flat asphalt and concrete of the Connecticut highways, I keep my speed at an even sixty miles per hour, conscious of the eager state police who patrol these roads. Radar detectors are still illegal in this state and the police here seem to relish their role as adjuncts to the state's tax collection department.

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They have the best unmarked cars in the region, and I am in no mood to tempt them as I drive, drive along.

Only once do I snap out of my reverie, and that's when two Harley-Davidson motorcycles rumble by, one on each side, the two men squat and burly in their low seats, long hair flapping in the breeze, goggles hiding their eyes, their denim vests and leather jackets looking too thin for this weather, their expressions saying they don't particularly care. The sight brings back some sharp memories: the wind in my face, the throb of the engine against my thighs, the almost Zen-like sense of traveling at high speed, just inches away from the asphalt and only seconds away from serious injury or death, and the certainty and comfort of what those motored bikes meant. Independence. Willing companions. Some sharp and tight actions. I almost sigh at the pleasurable memory. I have not ridden a motorcycle for years, and I doubt that I ever will again.

I'm busy with other things.

Somewhere in Massachusetts the morning and midmorning coffee I have drunk has managed to percolate through my kidneys and is demanding to be released, and after some long minutes I see a sign that marks a rest area. As I pull into the short exit lane I see a smaller sign that in one line sums up the idiocy of highway engineering: No Sanitary Facilities. A rest area without a rest room. Why not.

There's a tractor-trailer parked at the far end of the lot, and the driver is out, slouched by the tires, examining something. Nearly a dozen cars have stopped and it seems odd to me that so many drivers have pulled over in this empty rest area. All this traffic, all these weary drivers, at this hour of this holiday morning?

I walk past the empty picnic tables, my leather boots crunching on the two or three inches of snow, when a man comes out from behind a tree. He's smoking a cigarette and he's shivering, and his knee-length leather coat is open, showing jeans and a white T-shirt. His blond hair is cut quite short, and he's to the point: "Looking for a date?"

The number of parked and empty cars now makes sense and I feel slightly foolish. I nod at the man and say, "Nope. Just looking for an empty tree," and keep on going. Some way to spend a holiday.

I find my empty tree and as I relieve myself against the pine trunk, I hear footsteps approach. I zip up and turn around and two younger men are there. One has a moustache and the other a beard,

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and both are wearing baseball caps with the bills pointed to the rear. Jeans, short black leather jackets, and sneakers mark their dress code. I smile and say, "No thanks, guys. I'm all set," as I walk away from the tree.

The one with the scraggly moustache laughs. "You don't understand, faggot. We're not all set."

Now they both have knives out, and the one with the beard says, "Turn over your wallet, 'fore we cut you where it counts."

I hold up my empty hands and say, "Jeez, no trouble, guys." I reach back and in a breath or two, my Beretta is in my hand, pointing at the two men. Their pasty-white faces deflate, like day-old balloons losing air, and I give them my best smile. They backup a few steps but I shake my head, and they stop, mouths still open in shock.

"Gee," I say. "Now I've changed my mind. I guess I'm not all set. Both knives, toss them behind you."

The knives are thrown behind them, making clattering noises as they strike tree branches and trunks before hitting the ground. The two young men turn again, arms held up, and the bearded one's hands are shaking.

"Very good," I say. I move the Beretta back and forth, scanning, so that one of the two is always covered. "Next I want those pants off and your wallets on the ground, and your jackets. No arguing."

The one with the moustache says, "You can't—"

I cock the hammer back on the Beretta. The noise sounds like a tree branch cracking from too much snow and ice.

"You don't listen well," I say. "No arguing."

The two slump to the ground and in a matter of moments the clothing is in a pile, and then they stand up again. Their arms go back up. One of the two—the one with the moustache—was not wearing any underwear and he is shriveled with cold and fear. Their legs are pasty white and quivering and I feel no pity whatsoever. I say, "Turn around, kneel down, and cross your ankles. Now."

They do as they're told, and I can see their bodies flinch as their bare skin strikes the snow and ice. I swoop down and pick up the clothing and say, "Move in the next fifteen minutes and you'll disappear, just like that."

I toss the clothing on the hood of my car and pull out a set of car keys and two wallets. From the wallets I take out a bundle of bills in various denominations, and I don't bother counting it. I just shove it into my pants pocket, throw everything into the car, and drive off.

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After a mile I toss out the pants and jackets, and another mile after that, I toss out the car keys and wallets.

Too lenient, perhaps, but it is a holiday.

Ninety minutes later I pull over on a turn-off spot on Route 3, overlooking Boston Falls, the town which gave me the first years of my life. By now a light snow is falling and I check my watch. Ten minutes till one. Perfect timing. Mother always has her Thanksgiving dinner at three P.M., and I'll be on time, with a couple of free hours for chitchat and time for some other things. I lean against the warm hood of the Mercedes and look at the mills and buildings of the town below me. Self-portrait of the prodigal son returning, I think, and what would make the picture perfect would be a cigarette in my hand, thin gray smoke curling above my head, as I think great thoughts.

But I haven't smoked in years, and the thoughts I think aren't great, they're just troubled.

I wipe some snow off the fender of the car. The snow is small and dry, and whispers away with no problem.

A few minutes later I pull up to 74 Wall Street, the place where I grew up, a street with homes lining it on either side. The house is a small Cape Cod which used to be a bright red and now suffers a covering of tan vinyl siding. In my mind's eye, this house is always red. It's surrounded by a chain-link fence that Father put up during the few years of retirement he enjoyed before dying ("All my life, all I wanted was a fence to keep those goddamn dogs in the neighborhood from pissing on my shrubs, and now I'm going to get it."). I hope he managed to enjoy it before coughing up his lungs at Manchester Memorial. Father never smoked a cigarette in his life, but the air in those mills never passed through a filter on its journey to his lungs. Parked in front of the house is the battered tan Subaru that belongs to my younger brother Owen and the blue Ford pickup truck that is owned by older brother Brad.

On Owen's Subaru there is a sticker on the rear windshield for the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, and on Brad's Ford is a sticker for the Manchester Police Benevolent Society. One's life philosophy, spelled out in paper and gummed labels. The rear windshield of my Mercedes is empty. They don't make stickers for what I do or believe in.

Getting out of the car, I barely make it through the front door of

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the house before I'm assaulted by sounds, smells, and a handful of small children in the living room. The smells are of turkey and fresh bread, and most of the sounds come from the children yelling, "Uncle Carl! Uncle Carl!" as they jump around me. There are three of them—all girls—and they belong to Brad and his wife Deena: Carey, age twelve; Corinne, age nine; and the youngest, Christine, age six. All have blond hair in various lengths and they grasp at me, saying the usual kid things of how much they miss me, what was I doing, would I be up here long, and of course, their favorite question:

"Uncle Carl, did you bring any presents?"

Brad is standing by the television set in the living room, a grimace pretending to be a smile marking his face. Deena looks up to him, troubled, and then manages a smile for me and that's all I need. I toss my car keys to Carey, the oldest.

"In the trunk," I say, "and there's also one for your cousin."

The kids stream outside and then my brother Owen comes in from the kitchen holding his baby son Todd, and he's followed by his wife Jan, and Mother. Owen tries to say something, but Mother barrels by and gives me the required hug, kiss, and why-don't-you-call-me-more look. Mother's looking fine, wearing an apron that one of us probably gave her as a birthday gift a decade or two ago, and her eyes are bright and alive behind her glasses. Most of her hair is gray and is pulled back in a bun, and she's wearing a floral print dress.

"My, you are looking sharp as always, Carl," she says admiringly, turning to see if Owen and Brad agree, and Owen smiles and Brad pretends to be watching something on television. Jan looks at me and winks, and I do nothing in return.

Mother goes back into the kitchen and I follow her and get a glass of water. When she isn't looking I reach up to a shelf and pull down a sugar bowl that contains her "mad money." I shove in the wad that I liberated earlier this day, and I return the bowl to the shelf, just in time to help stir the gravy.

As she works about the stove with me Owen comes in, still holding his son Todd, and Jan is with him. Owen sits down, looking up at me, holding the baby and its bottle, and it gurgles with what seems to be contentment. Owen's eyes are shiny behind his round, wire-rimmed glasses, and he says, "How are things in New York?"

"Cold," I say. "Loud. Dirty. The usual stuff."

Owen laughs and Jan joins in, but there's a different sound in her laugh. Owen is wearing a shapeless gray sweater and tan chinos,

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while Jan has on designer jeans and a buttoned light pink sweater that's about one button too many undone. Her brown hair is styled and shaped, and I can tell from her eyes that the drink in her hand isn't the first of the day.

"Maybe so," she says, "but at least it isn't boring, like some places people are forced to live."

Mother pretends to be busy about the stove and Owen is still smiling, though his eyes have faltered, as if he has remembered some old debt unpaid. I give Jan a sharp look and she just smiles and drinks, and I say to Owen, "How's the reporting?"

He shrugs, gently moving Todd back and forth. "The usual. Small-town stuff that doesn't get much coverage. But I've been thinking about starting a novel, nights when I get home from meetings. Something about small towns and small-town corruption."

Jan clicks her teeth against her glass. "Maybe your brother can help you. With some nasty ideas."

I finish off my water and walk past her. "Oh, I doubt that very much," I say, and I go into the living room, hearing the sound of Jan's laughter as I go.

The three girls have come back and the floor is a mess of shredded paper and broken boxes, as they ooh and aah over their gifts. There's a mix of clothing and dolls, the practical and the playful, because I know to the penny how much my older brother Brad makes each year and his budget is prohibitively tight.

His wife Deena is on the floor, playing with the girls, and she gives me a happy nod as I come in and sit down on the couch. She is a large woman and has on black stretch pants and a large blue sweater. I find that the more I get to know Deena, the more I like her. She comes from a farm family and makes no bones about having dropped out of high school at age sixteen. Though she's devoted utterly and totally to my brother, she also has a sharp rural way of looking at things, and though I'm sure Brad has told her many awful stories about me, she has also begun to trust her own feelings. I think she likes me, though I know she would never admit that to Brad.

Brad is sitting in an easy chair across the way, intent on looking at one of the Thanksgiving Day parades. He's wearing sensible black shoes, gray slacks, and an orange sweater, and pinned to one side is a turkey button, probably given to him by one of his daughters. Brad has a thin moustache and his black hair is slicked back, for

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he started losing it at age sixteen. He looks all right, though there's a roll of fat beginning to swell about his belly.

"How's it going, Brad?" I ask, sending out the first peace feeler.

"Oh, not bad," he says, eyes not leaving the screen.

"Detective work all right? Got any interesting cases you're working on?"

"Unh hunh," and he moves a glass of what looks like milk from one hand to the other.

"Who do you think will win the afternoon game?" I try again.

He shrugs. "Whoever has the best team, I imagine."

Well. Deena looks up again, troubled, and I just give her a quiet nod, saying with my look that everything's all right, and then I get up from the couch and go outside and get my winter coats and overnight bag and bring them back inside. I drop them off upstairs in the tiny room that used to be my bedroom so many years and memories ago, and then I look into a mirror over a battered bureau and say, "Time to get to work," and that makes me laugh. For the first time in a long time I'm working gratis.

I go downstairs to the basement, switching on the overhead fluorescents, which *click-click-hum* into life. Father's old workbench is in one corner, and dumped near the workbench is a pile of firewood for the living room fireplace. The rest of the basement is taken up with boxes, old bicycles, and a washer and drier. The basement floor is concrete and relatively clean. I go upstairs fast, taking two steps at a time. Brad is in the living room, with his three girls, trying to show some enthusiasm for the gifts I brought. I call out to him and he looks up.

"Yeah?" he says.

"C'mere," I say, excitement tingeing my voice. "You won't believe what I found."

He pauses for a moment, as if debating with himself whether he should ever trust his younger brother, and I think his cop curiosity wins out, for he says, " 'Scuse me," to his daughters and ambles over.

"What's going on?" he says in that flat voice I think cops learn at their service academy.

"Downstairs," I say. "I was poking around and behind Father's workbench there's an old shoebox. Brad, it looks like your baseball card collection, the one Mother thought she tossed away."

For the first time I get a reaction out of Brad and a grin pops into life. "Are you sure?"

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"Sure looks like it to me. C'mon down and take a look."

Brad brushes by me and thunders downstairs on the plain wooden steps, and I follow close behind, saying, "You've got to stretch across the table and really take a close look, Brad, but I think it's them."

He says, "My God, it's been almost twenty years since I've seen them. Think of how much money they could be worth . . ."

In front of the workbench Brad leans over, casting his head back and forth, his orange sweater rising up, treating me to a glimpse of his bare back and the top of his hairy buttocks, and he says, "Carl, I don't see—"

And with that I pick up a piece of firewood and pound it into the back of his skull.

Brad makes a coughing sound and falls on top of the workbench, and I kick away his legs and he swears at me and in a minute or two of tangled struggle, he ends up on his back. I straddle his chest, my knees digging into his upper arms, a forearm pressed tight against his throat, and he gurgles as I slap his face with my free hand.

"Do I have your attention, older brother?"

He curses some more and struggles, and I press in again with my forearm and replay the slapping. I'm thankful that no one from upstairs has heard us. I say, "Older brother, I'm younger, faster, and stronger, and we need to talk; if you'll stop thrashing around, we'll get somewhere."

Another series of curses, but then he starts gurgling louder and nods, and I ease up on the forearm and say, "Just how stupid do you have to be before you stop breathing, Brad?"

"What the hell are you doing, you maniac?" he demands, his voice a loud whisper. "I'm gonna have you arrested for assault, you no-good—"

I lean back with the forearm and he gurgles some more and I say, "Listen once, and listen well, older brother. I got a phone call last night from an old friend saying my police-detective brother is now in the pocket of one Bill Sutler. You mind telling me how the hell that happened?"

His eyes bug out and I pull back my forearm and he says, "I don't know what the hell you're talking about, you lowlife biker."

Two more slaps to the face. "First, I'm no biker and you know it. Second, I'm talking about Bill Sutler, who handles the numbers and other illegal adventures for this part of this lovely state. I'm talking

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about an old friend I can trust with my life telling me that you now belong to this charming gentleman. Now. Let's stop dancing and start talking, shall we?"

Brad's eyes are piggish and his face is red, his slick black hair now a tangle, and I'm preparing for another struggle or another series of denials, and then it's like a dam that has been ruptured, a wall that has been breached, for I feel his body loosen underneath me, and he turns his face. "Shit," he whispers.

"Gambling?" I ask.

He just nods. "How much?" I ask again.

"Ten K," he says. "It's the vig that's killing me, Carl, week after week, and now, well, now he wants more than just money."

"Of course," I say, leaning back some. "Information. Tip-offs. Leads on some investigations involving him and his crew."

Brad looks up and starts talking and I slap him again, harder, and I lean back into him and say in my most vicious tone, "Where in hell have you been storing your brains these past months, older brother? Do you have even the vaguest idea of what you've gotten yourself into? Do you think a creature like Bill Sutler is going to let you go after a couple of months? Of course not, and if he ever gets arrested by the state or the feds, he's going to toss you up for a deal so fast you'll think the world is spinning backwards."

He tries to talk but I keep plowing on. "Then let's take it from there, after you get turned over. Upstairs is a woman who loves you so much she'd probably go after this Sutler guy with her bare hands if she could, and you have three daughters who think you're the best daddy in the Western Hemisphere. Not to mention a woman who thinks you're the good son, the successful one, and a younger brother who wishes he could be half the man you pretend you are. Think of how they'll all do, how they'll live, when they see you taken away to the state prison in orange overalls."

By now Brad is silently weeping, the tears rolling down his quivering cheeks, and I feel neither disgust nor pity. It's what I expected, what I planned for, and I say, "Then think about what prison will be like, you, a cop, side by side with some rough characters who would leap at a chance to introduce you to some hard loving. Do I have your attention now, older brother? Do I?"

He's weeping so much that he can only nod, and then I get off his chest and stand up and he rolls over, in a fetal position, whispering faint obscenities, over and over again, and I don't mind since they're not aimed at me.

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"Where does this guy Sutler live?" I ask.

"Purmort," he says.

"Get up," I say. "I'm going to pay him a visit, and you're going to help."

Brad sits up, snuffling, and leans back against the wooden workbench. "You're going to see him? Now? An hour before Thanksgiving dinner? You're crazy, even for a biker."

I shrug, knowing that I will be washing my hands momentarily. They look clean, but right now they feel quite soiled. "He'll talk to me, and you're going to back me up, because I'm saving your sorry ass this afternoon."

Brad looks suspicious. "What does that mean?"

"You'll find out, soon enough."

Before Brad can say anything, the door upstairs opens up and Deena calls down, "Hey, you guys are missing the parade."

I look at Brad and he's rubbing at his throat. I reply to Deena, "So we are, so we are."

Fifteen minutes later I pull into Founder's Park, near the Bellamy River, in an isolated section of town. Of course it's deserted on this special day and I point out an empty park bench, near two snow-covered picnic tables. "Go sit there and contemplate your sorry life."

"What?"

"I said, get out there and contemplate your sorry life. I'm going to talk to this Sutler character alone."

"But—"

"I'm getting you out of trouble today, older brother, and all I ask from you is one thing. That you become my alibi. Anything comes up later today or next week that has to do with me, you're going to swear as a gentleman and a police officer that the two of us were just driving around at this time of the day, looking at the town and having some fond recollections before turkey dinner. Understand?"

Brad looks stubborn for a moment and says, "It's cold out there."

I reach behind me and pull out the thermos bottle that Raphael had packed for me, so many hours and places ago. "Here. I freshened it up at the house a while ago, before we left. Go out there and sit and I'll be back."

That same stubborn look. "Why are you doing this for me?"

I lean over him and open the door. "Not for you. For the family. Get out, will you? I don't want to be late."

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At last he steps out and walks over to the park bench, the thermos bottle in his humiliated hands, and he sits down and stares out at the frozen river. He doesn't look my way as I pull out and head to Purmort.

I've parked the Mercedes on a dirt road that leads into an abandoned gravel pit, and I have a long wool winter coat on over my cardigan sweater. The air is still and some of the old trees still have coverings of snow looking like plastic casts along the branches. There's a faint maze of animal tracks in the snow, and I recognize the prints of a rabbit and a squirrel. I'm leaning against the front hood of the Mercedes as a black Ford Bronco ambles up the dirt path. It parks in front of my car and I feel a quick tinge of unease: I don't like having my escape routes blocked, and then the unease grows as two men get out of the Bronco. I had only been expecting one.

The man on the right moves a bit faster than his companion and I figure that he's Bill Sutler. My guess is correct, and it is he who begins to chatter at me.

"Let me start off by saying I don't like you already for two reasons," he says in a gravelly tone that's either come from throat surgery or too many cigarettes at an early age. He's just a few inches shorter than me, and though his black hair is balding, he has a long strip at the back tied in a ponytail. Fairly fancy for this part of the state. His face is slightly pockmarked with old acne scars, and he has on a bright blue ski jacket with the obligatory tattered ski passes hanging from the zipper. Jeans and dull orange construction boots finish off his ensemble.

"Why's that?" I say, arms and legs crossed, still leaning against the warm hood of my Mercedes, my boots in the snow cover.

"Because you pulled me out of my house on Thanksgiving, and because of your license plates," he says, pointing to the front of my Mercedes, talking fast, his entire face seemingly squinting at me. "You're from New York, and I hate guys from New York who think they can breeze in here and throw their weight around. You're in my woods now, guy, and I don't care what games you've played back on your crappy island. We do things different up here."

His companion has stepped away from the passenger's side of the Bronco and is keeping watch on me. He seems a bit younger but he's considerably more bulky, with a tangle of curly hair and a thick beard. He's wearing an army fatigue coat and the same jeans/boot combination that Sutler is sporting. I note that the right pocket of

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his coat is sagging some, from the weight of something inside.

I nod over to the second man. "That your muscle, along to keep things quiet?"

Sutler turns his head for a moment. "That there's Kelly, and he's here because I want him here. I tell him to leave, he'll leave. I tell him to break every finger on your hands, he'd do that, too. So let's leave him out of things right now. Talk. You got me here, what do you want?"

I rub at my chin. "I want something that you have. I want Brad Curtis's *cojones,* and I understand you have them in your pocket."

Sutler smirks. "That I do. What's your offer?"

This just might be easy. "In twenty-four hours, I settle his gambling debt," I say. "I also put in a word to a couple of connected guys, and some extra business gets tossed your way. You get your money, you get some business, and I get what I want. You also never have any contact or dealings with him again, any time in the future."

"You're a relation, right?"

I nod. "His brother."

"Younger or older?"

"Younger."

Sutler smirks again, and I decide I don't like the look. "Isn't that sweet. Well, look at this, younger brother. The answer is no."

I cock my head. "Is that a real no, or do you want a counter offer? If it's a counter offer, mention something. I'm sure I can be reasonable."

He laughs and rocks back on his heels a bit and says, "Little one, this isn't a negotiation. The answer is no."

"Why?"

That stops him for a moment, and there's a furtive gesture from his left hand, and Kelly steps a bit closer. "Because I already told you," he says. "I don't like you New York guys, and I don't trust you. Sure, you'd probably pay off the money, but everything else you say is probably crap. You think I'm stupid? Well, I think you're stupid, and here's why. I got something good in that nitwit detective, and you and your New York friends aren't going to take it away. I got him and my work here on my own, and I don't need your help. Understand?"

"Are you sure?"

Another laugh. "You think I'm giving up a detective on the largest police force in this state for you? The stuff he can feed me is pure

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gold, little one, and it's gonna set me for life. There's nothing you have that can match that. Nothing."

He gestures again. "And I'm tired of you, and I'm tired of this crap. I'm going back home."

"Me too," I say, and I slide my hand into the cardigan, pull out my Beretta, and blow away Kelly's left knee.

Kelly is on the ground, howling, and the echo of the shot is still bouncing about the hills as I slam the Beretta into the side of Sutler's head. He falls, and I stride over to Kelly. Amid his thrashings on the now-bloody snow, I grab a .357 revolver from his coat and toss it into the woods. In a matter of heartbeats I'm back to Sutler, who's on the ground, fumbling to get into his ski jacket. I kick him solidly in the crotch. He yelps and then I'm on him, the barrel of the Beretta jamming into his lips until he gags and has a couple of inches of the oily metal in his mouth. His eyes are very wide and there's a splotch of blood on his left cheek. I take a series of deep breaths, knowing that I want my voice cool and calm.

"About sixty seconds ago I was interested in negotiating with you, but now I've lost interest. Do you understand? If you do, nod your head, but nod it real slow. It's cold and my fingers are beginning to get numb."

His eyes are tearing and he nods, just like I said. "Very good," I say, trying to place a soothing tone in my voice. "I came here in a good mood, in a mood to make a deal that could help us both, and all you've done since we've met is insult me. Do you think I got up early this morning and drove half the day so a creature like you can toss insults my way? Do you?"

Though I didn't explain to him the procedure for shaking his head, Sutler shows some initiative and gently shakes it. Kelly, some yards away, is still groaning and occasionally crying. I ignore him because I want to, and I think Sutler is ignoring him because he has to.

"Now," I continue. "If you had some random brain cells in that sponge between your ears, I think you would have figured out that because this matter involves my brother, I might have a personal interest in what was going on. But you were too stupid to realize that, correct?"

Another nod of the head, and saliva and blood is beginning to drip down the barrel of the Beretta. "So instead of accepting a very generous offer, you said no and insulted me. So you left me no

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choice. I had to show you how serious I was, and I had to make an impression."

I gesture over to the sobbing hulk of his companion. "Take a look at Kelly if you can. I don't know the man, I have nothing against him, and if the two of us had met under different circumstances, we might have become friends."

Well, I doubt that, but I keep my doubts to myself. I am making a point. "But I had to make an example," I continue, "and in doing so, I've just crippled Kelly for life. Do you understand that? His knee is shattered and he'll never walk well again for the next thirty or forty years of his life because of your ill manners and stubbornness. Now. You having rejected my offer, here's my counteroffer. Are you now interested?"

Another nod, a bit more forceful. "Good. Here it is. You forget the gambling debt. You forget you ever knew my brother, and you take poor Kelly here to a hospital and tell them that he was shot in a hunting accident or something. I don't care. And if you ever bother my brother or his family, any time in the future, I'll come back."

I poke the Beretta in another centimeter or two, and Sutler groans. "Then I'll find out who counts most in your life—your mother, your wife, your child, for all I know—and I'll do the same thing to them that I did to Kelly. Oh, I could make it permanent, but a year or two after the funeral, you usually get on with life. Not with this treatment. The person suffers in your presence, for decades to come, because of you. Now. Is the deal complete?"

Sutler closes his teary eyes and nods, and I get up, wiping the Beretta's barrel on his ski jacket. Sutler is grimacing and the crotch of his pants is wet and steaming in the cold. Kelly is curled up on his side, weeping, his left leg a bloody mess, and I take a step back and gently prod Sutler with my foot.

"Move your Bronco, will you?" I ask politely.

My brother's face is a mix of anger and hope as he climbs back into my Mercedes, rubbing his hands from the cold. His face and ears are quite red.

"Well?" he asks.

"Piece of cake," I say, and I drive back to the house.

Dinner is long and wonderful, and I have a sharp appetite and eat well, sitting at the far end of the table. My nieces good-naturedly fight over the supposed honor of sitting next to me, which makes

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Mother and Deena laugh, and even Brad attempts a smile or two. I stuff myself and we regale each other with stories of holidays and Christmases and Thanksgivings past, and Owen bounces Todd on his knee as Jan smiles to herself and sips from one glass of wine and then another.

I feel good belonging here with them. Though I know that none of them quite knows who I am or what I do, it's still a comfortable feeling. It's like nothing else I experience, ever, and I cherish it.

Later, I take a nap in my old bedroom, and feeling greasy from the day's exertions and the long meal, I take a quick shower, remembering a lot of days and weeks and years gone past as I climb into the tiny stall. It seems fairly humorous that I am in this house taking a weak and lukewarm shower after having remembered this creaky bathroom earlier this morning, back at my Manhattan home. That explains why I am smiling when I go back into my old bedroom, threadbare light green towel wrapped around my waist, and I find Jan there, waiting for me, my brother Owen's wife.

Her eyes are aglitter and her words are low and soft, but there's a hesitation there, as if she realizes she has been drinking for most of the day and she has to be careful in choosing each noun and verb. She's standing by an old bureau, jean-encased hip leaning up against the wood, and she has something in her hands.

"Look at this, will you," she says. "Found it up here while I was waiting for you."

I step closer and I can smell the alcohol on her breath, and I also smell something a bit earthier. I try not to sigh, seeing the eager expression on her face. I take her offering and turn it over. It's an old color photograph, and it shows a heavyset man with a beard and long hair in a ponytail sitting astride a black Harley-Davidson motorcycle. He's wearing the obligatory jeans and leather vest. His arms are tattooed. The photo is easily a decade old, and in those years the chemicals on the print have faded and mutated, so that there's an eerie yellow glow about everything, as if the photo were taken at a time when volcanic ash was drifting through the air.

I look closely at the photo and then hand it back to my sister-in-law. About the only thing I recognize about the person is the eyes, for it's the only thing about me that I've not changed since that picture was taken.

"That's really you, isn't it?" she asks, that eager tone in her voice still there. With her in my old room, everything seems crowded.

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There's a tiny closet, the bureau, a night table, and lumpy bed with thin blankets and sheets. A window about the size of a pie plate looks out to the pale green vinyl siding of the house next door.

"Yes, that's me," I say. "Back when I was younger and dumber."

She licks her lips. "Asking questions about you of Owen is a waste of time, and your mother and Brad aren't much help either. You were a biker, right?"

I nod. "That's right."

"What was it like, Carl?" she asks, moving a few inches closer to me. I know I should feel embarrassed, standing in my old bedroom with my sister-in-law, just wearing a towel, but I'm not sure what I feel. I just know it's not embarrassment. So instead of debating the point, I answer her question.

"It was like moving to a different country and staying at home, all at the same time," I say. "There was an expression, something about being free and being a citizen. Being free meant the bike and your friends and whatever money you had for gas and food, and the time to travel anywhere you wanted, any time, with no one to stop you, feeling the wind in your hair and face. Being a citizen meant death, staying at home, paying taxes, and working a forty-hour week. That's what it was like."

She gives me a sharp-toothed smile. "You almost make it sound like a Boy Scout troop. Way your older brother talks, I figure you've been in trouble."

I shrug. "Comes with the territory. It's something you get used to. Being free means you run into a lot of different people, and sometimes their tempers are short and their memories are long. Sometimes you do some work for some money that wouldn't look good on a job application form."

"So that explains the scars?" she asks.

"Yeah, I guess it does."

"So why did you change? What happened? From the picture, I can tell you've had your tattoos taken off."

I look around and see that my clothes are still on the bed where I left them. "I got tired of having my life depend on other people. Thing is, you run with a group, the group can sometimes pull you down. What the group accomplishes can come back at night and break your windows, or gnaw on your leg. And I didn't want to become a citizen. So I chose a bit of each world and made my own, and along the way I changed my look."

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"And what do you do now? Everyone says consulting work, but they always have an uncomfortable look on their face when they mention that, like they have gas or something. So what's your job?"

I pause and say, "Systems engineer."

Her eyes blink in amusement. "A what?"

"Systems engineer. Sometimes a system needs an outside pressure or force to make a necessary change or adjustment. That's what I do. I'm an independent contractor."

"Sounds very exciting," she says, arching an eyebrow this time. "You should talk some to your younger brother. Maybe pass some of that excitement along. Or maybe you're the brother who got it all in this family."

I now feel an aching sorrow for Owen, and I try not to think of what their pillow talk must be like at night. "Guess you have to work with what you've got."

"Unh-hunh," she says. "Look, you must be getting cold. Are you going to get dressed, or what?"

I decide she wants a show, or wants something specific to happen, so I say, "Or what, I suppose." I turn to the bed and drop the towel and get dressed, and I hear a hush of breath coming from her. After the underwear, pants, and boots, I turn, buttoning my shirt, and she's even closer and I reach to her and she comes forward, lips wet, and then I strike out and put a hand around her throat. And I squeeze.

"Jan," I say, stepping forward and looking into her eyes, "you and I are about to come to an agreement, do you understand?"

"What are you doing, you—" and I squeeze again, and she makes a tiny yelping sound, and her nostrils begin to flare as she tries to breathe harder. She starts to flail with her hands and I grab one hand and press her against the bureau. It shakes and she tries to kick, but I'm pushing at her at an uncomfortable angle, and she can't move.

"This won't take long, but I ask that you don't yell. You try to yell and I'll squeeze hard enough to make you black out. Do you understand? Try blinking your eyes."

She blinks, tears forming in her eyes. My mind plays with a few words and then I say, "Owen and my family mean everything to me. Everything. And right now, by accident of marriage and the fact of my brother's love, you're part of this family. But not totally. My mother and Owen and even Brad come before you. You're not equal in my eyes, do you understand?"

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She moves her head a bit, and I'm conscious that I might have to take another shower when I'm finished. "So that's where I'm coming from when I tell you this: I don't care if you love my brother or hate my brother, but I do demand this. That you show him respect. He deserves that. Stay with him or leave him tonight, I don't care. But don't toss yourself to those random men that manage to cross your path, especially ones related to him. If you can't stand being with him, leave, but do it with dignity. Show him respect or I'll hurt you, Jan."

"You're hurting me now," she whispers.

"No, I'm not," I explain. "I'm not hurting you. I'm getting your attention. In an hour you'll be just fine, but in a hundred years you're always going to remember this conversation in this dingy bedroom. Am I right?"

She nods and I say, "So we've reached an understanding. Agreed?"

Another nod and I let her go and back away, and Jan rubs at her throat and coughs. Then she whispers a dark series of curses and leaves, slamming the door behind her, and what scares me is that she isn't crying, not one tear, not one sign of regret or fear.

I finish getting dressed, trying not to think of Owen.

Despite a lumpy bed and too-silent surroundings of Boston Falls, I sleep fairly well that night, with none of those disturbing dreams of loud words and sharp actions that sometimes bring me awake. I get up with the sun and slowly walk through the living room to the kitchen. Sprawled across the carpeted floor in sleeping bags are my three nieces—Carey, Corinne, and Christine—and their shy innocence and the peacefulness of their slight breathing touches something inside of me that I wasn't sure even existed anymore.

Mother is in the kitchen and I give her a brief hug and grab a cup of coffee. I try not to grimace as I sip the brew; Mother, God bless her, has never made a decent cup of coffee in her life. I've been dressed since getting up and Mother is wearing a faded blue bathrobe, and as she stirs a half-dozen eggs in a mixing bowl she looks over at me through her thick glasses and says, "I'm not that dumb, you know."

I gamely try another sip of coffee. "I've always known that, ever since you found my collection of girlie magazines when I was in high school."

"Bah," she says, stirring the whisk harder. "I knew you had those for a while, and I knew boys always get curious at that age. I didn't

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mind much until your younger brother Owen was snooping around. Then I couldn't allow it. He was too young."

She throws in a bit of grated cheese and goes back to the bowl and says, "Are you all right, Carl?"

"Just fine."

"I wonder," she says. "Yesterday you were roaming around here like a panther at the zoo, and then you and Brad go off for a mysterious trip. You said it was just a friendly trip, but the two of you haven't been friends for years. You do something bad out there?"

I think about Kelly with the shattered leg and Bill Sutler with his equally ruined day, and I say, "Yeah, I suppose so."

Her voice is sharp. "Was it for Brad?"

Even Mother probably can see the surprise on my face, so I say, "Yes, it was for Brad."

"You hurt someone?"

I nod. "But he deserved it, Mom."

Then she puts down her utensils and wipes her hands on her apron and says, "That's what you do for a living, isn't it, Carl? You hurt people."

Right then I wish the coffee tasted better, for I could take a sip and gain a few seconds for a response, but Mother is looking right through me and I say, "You're absolutely right."

She sighs. "But yesterday was for Brad. And the money you send me, and the gifts for your nieces, and everything else, all comes from your job. Hurting people."

"That's right."

Mother goes back to the eggs, starts whisking again with the wire beater, and says, "I've known that for a very long time, ever since you claimed you quit being a biker. I just knew you went on to something different, something probably even worse, though you certainly dressed better and looked clean."

She looks over again. "Thank you for the truth, Carl. And I'll never ask you again, you can believe that. Just tell me that what you do is right, and that you're happy."

So I tell her what she wants to hear, and she gives me another hug, and then there's some noise as the kids get up.

And then after breakfast it's time to go, and though Jan hangs back and says nothing, the kids are all over me, as is Mother, and even Deena—Brad's wife—gives me a peck on the cheek. Owen shakes my hand and I tell him to call me, anytime, making sure that Jan

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has heard me. And then there's the surprise, as Brad shakes my hand for the first time in a very long year or five.

"Thanks," he says. "And, um, well, come by sometime. The girls do miss you."

With that one sentence playing in my mind, I drive for over an hour, not bothering with the music on my CD player, for I'm hearing louder music in my head.

Later that night I'm in my large sunken tub, a small metal pitcher of vodka martinis on the marble floor. Sarah is in the tub with me, suds up to her lovely and full chest, and her hair is drawn up around her head, making her look like a Gibson Girl from the turn of the century. I talk for some minutes and she laughs a few times and then reaches out with a wet and soapy foot and caresses my side. Like myself, she's holding a glass full of ice cubes and clear liquid.

"Only a guy like you, Carl, could travel hours to your family's home on a holiday weekend and bring your work with you," she says.

I sink a bit in the tub, feeling the hot water relax my back muscles. It had snowed some on the way back, and I'm still a bit tense from the drive.

"It wasn't work," I say. "It was a favor, a family thing."

"Mmmm," she says, sipping from her glass. "So that makes it all right?"

I shrug. "It just makes it, I guess."

"A worthwhile trip, then?"

"Very," I say, drinking from my own glass, enjoying the slightly oily bite of the drink. She sighs again and says, "You never really answered me, you know."

I close my eyes and say, "I didn't know I owed you an answer."

She nudges me with her foot. "Brute. From Thursday morning. When I asked you why you went there. And all you could say was family. Is that it, Carl? Truly?"

I know the true answer, which is that the little group of people in that tiny town are the only thing I have that is not bought or paid for in blood, and that keeping that little tie alive and well is important, very important to me. For if that tie were broken, then whatever passes for a human being in me would shrivel up and rot away, and I could not allow that. That is the truth, but I don't feel like debating philosophy tonight.

So I say, "Haven't you heard the expression?"

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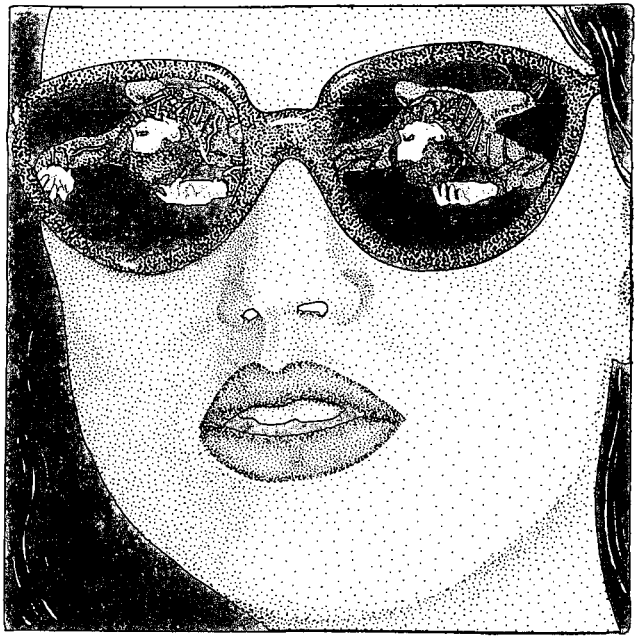
"What's that?"

I raise my drink to her in a toast. "Even the bad can do good."

Sarah makes a face and tosses the drink's contents at me, and then water starts slopping over onto the floor, and the lovely evening gets even lovelier, and there's no more talk of family and obligations, which is just fine.



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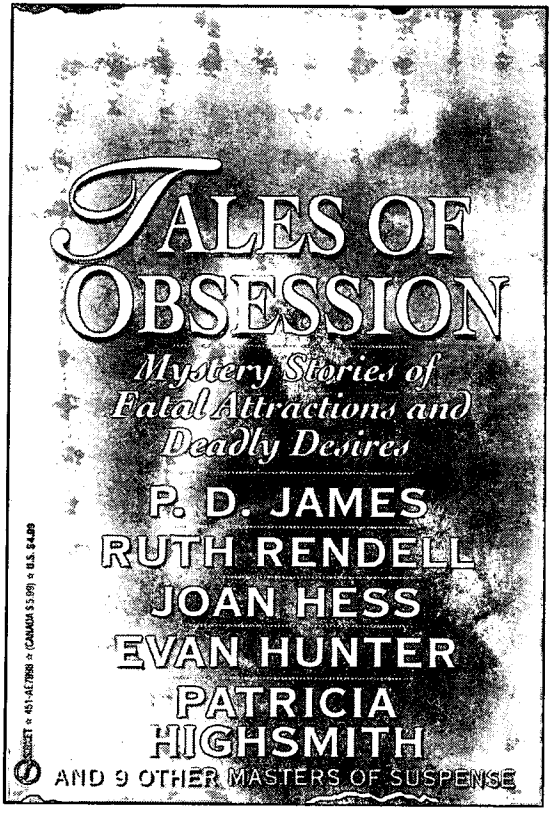
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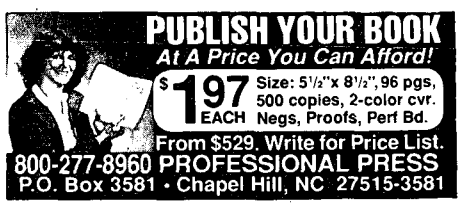
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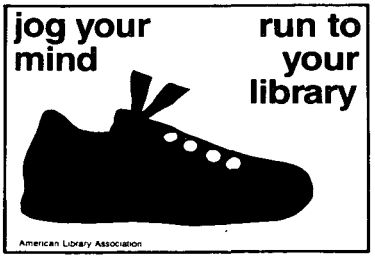

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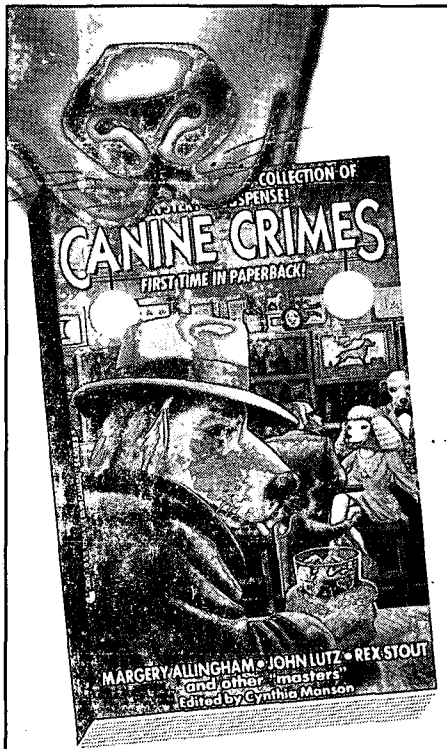

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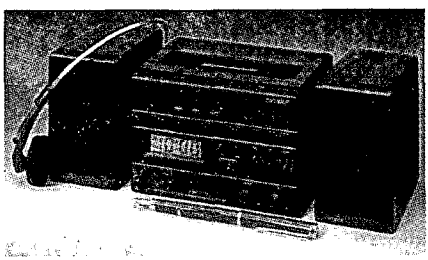

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